

Quiet Interior

E.B.C. JONES



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QUIET INTERIOR

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BY E. ^{mily}B. ^{batist}C. ^{consonella.}JONES
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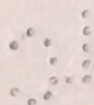
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PART ONE
THE SCRUPULOUS SOUL

CHAPTER I

SISTERS AND MOTHERS

CLAIRE went slowly upstairs, pulling off her reindeer gloves. As her head came level with the landing window, which looked out on to the paved court of a club, she saw the fine black tracery of leafless plane trees against the blue October sky. There was some magic for her in leafless boughs: she loved their austerity, the rhythm of their lines, unblurred by bursting, sticky buds, pricked vernal leaves, thick drooping foliage, tassels, streaks or cones of bloom. She loved etchings, the sharp silhouette of crags and masonry; rain frozen in hard ruts; dew on dark thorns; frost pencillings on the pane; the pale tints and thin lines of a wintry country-side. But this taste for severity and pallor was no indication of asceticism; it was as sensuous and æsthetic as another's love for deep banks of flowers, luxurious fabrics. One standing before an espalier crucified upon the wall, would rejoice if an apricot, sunned through to the core, dropped into his hand; and Claire's pleasure in the pattern of the espalier and its slender leaves would be no less.

There was in her appearance a clue to her tastes—something fastidious, and delicately sombre in her dress; something “slender and austere” in the lines and colours of her countenance. Her face was pale, and significant only because it was clear-cut; her hair dark and well under control; her clothes mole-grey. Nothing in her, as it were, broke out—not a vivid jewel or ribbon nor a predominating feature; her facial irregularities were not sufficiently marked to mar the whole effect of

intaglio-like fineness and restraint : she would always be—precious, perhaps, but not generally prized. Not even a walk in the sharp morning air, shot through with brilliant sunlight, had tinged her cheeks, and her expression was dreamy. She had paced St. James's Park half wrapped away in childish memories, half conscious of good health, fine weather and gentle melancholy. This last was all the toll demanded of her, to-day, by the war which hung like a vast obscure yet lurid black cloth against which she herself and the population of London moved and gesticulated like puppets too small for the proportions of their stage. Sometimes she was stricken with the horror of imagined and unimaginable death, agony and loss ; sometimes when she heard others talk complacently of the war, dealing with it in fatuous catchwords, she was filled with impotent amazed fury ; but to-day, her imagination having gone back into the past, sudden death, blood, uproar and pain seemed remote and improbable. The season of misty mornings and falling leaves denied the possibility of warfare.

Even in a dreamy mood Claire's poise was alert. She moved easily ; without having given one half-thought to her climb she had reached the third floor, and stood outside her sister's room. She went quietly in.

Pauline lay asleep, in a white painted bed, whose posts were carved into conventional little palm-trees that reminded one of the sunshades held over court ladies by black boys in French prints. The whole room was white and buff, high, large, sunny and panelled. It was full now of frosty warmth, a very faint smell and a sense of well-being. Two wedge-shaped plaques of sunlight lay on the parquet beneath the windows ; Claire passed like a substantial shadow over them and looked out of the window into the street, which lay vacant in the sunny forenoon. Her sister did not move. The only noise was the stirring of the small fire, before which

a green frock hung over a chair. The maid had lit the fire and that was all; two green satin shoes lay where they had been tossed off beside the bed. The gilt travelling clock on the Adam mantelpiece struck eleven. Claire went over to it, and ran her finger nail down the golden beading; the hands shone blue-black like a beetle's wing. She leant above the fire, listening to the distant rumble of Westminster and to the deep quiet of the house. She was alone with a stranger; even our intimate friends are strangers when they sleep, and have to be re-learnt. Sleepers are only a few degrees more like themselves than corpses are like the living beings they were a short while since. Claire and Pauline were intimate, but from proximity not friendship. Adolescence had partially alienated them, and the alienation did not disturb them. They were coolly fond, loyal with the loyalty of youth in a world ruled by the requirements of the old—not with the loyalty of love. They no more regretted the close ties of childhood than they regretted their old habit of chewing each other's thumbs. . . . One does, after all, grow up and alter.

Presently Claire went over to the bed and said, "Wake up! You lazy beast, wake up."

Pauline half opened her grey eyes and mumbled: "Ooh. Beast to wake me. What time is it?"

"Nearly noon."

"I didn't get to bed till four. Ring, like a dear. Salmi of pheasant has no staying power."

"Was it fun?"

"Yes. But that oaf Gertrude had on a blue version of my dress—a sickly blue. Has Mamma got the car out?"

"Yes. I think she's gone to some exhibition."

"Dash! Never mind. Oh, I say, Claire, who do you think was there last night?"

"Can't think. All Bayswater, I suppose, preceded by noses."

"Funny! It's a pity you didn't come. I somehow knew something was going to happen."

"Don't start premonitions, for goodness sake. Well, who?"

"Ivor Webb."

"Oh. What was he doing?"

"Sensation? No sensation! Really, Claire, I do think you might show a little intelligent surprise; as Aunt Connie says, you've no social sense. . . . The great Ivor is on leave."

Claire sat quiet, and with averted face, moving her eyes from one to the other of Pauline's toilet accessories: ivory boxes and brushes, each set with a blue wedgwood medallion. It was only with a shrinking feeling that she recalled her brief relationship with Ivor Webb; she was ashamed, not of the part she had played, but of the excitement which had tinged her disgust at his part—she ought only to have been repelled and indignant; she had been, besides, moved, not altogether unpleasantly, and a little flattered. She excused her past self to her condemning present self: "I was only nineteen."

"He's coming to-day," Pauline went on. "Shall you be in? And does he take in what one wears?"

Claire noticed that Pauline regarded her as an authority on the young man. "No," she answered.

"No, to which? He suggested coming himself. I must have made an impression, Claire, mustn't I? What shall I wear?"

"Unadorned, save for a—I didn't know you were keen on Ivor," Claire said with sufficient nonchalance.

"Ah, you don't know everything." The younger girl's tone was fatuous; it irritated her sister, who got up from the bed and exclaimed impulsively: "Well, if you understand half he says you'll be cleverer than me." She immediately regretted her speech when Pauline, whose curiosity it had aroused, asked her what she meant.

"Oh well, I dare say I could cope with several Ivor Webbs now, but when he stayed with us at Sparrows I was your age. He spent the whole week talking—as though he had a bet on to utter several million sentences. But I dare say he won't do that to you; you're pretty."

Pauline felt rather at a loss, but her answer was suitably, amusedly sceptical: "He treated you specially, did he? Epigrams, was it?"

"No, not epigrams. But he did think he was being rather clever."

Conscious of having been baffled—though why she had no idea—Pauline began to eat the breakfast that a maid had just brought in. "What should you say was his best quality?" she presently asked.

"I should say his appreciation of charm and intelligence and beauty. He's always on the spot with his responsiveness—that's the nice thing about him."

"Yes, it is pleasant to be appreciated. . . . Be an angel and turn on my bath." Pauline's perpetual assumption that those around her were willing, if not anxious, to serve her, was on the whole successful. Her sister went into the adjoining bathroom—tiny and white-tiled. When she returned, Pauline was standing before the mirror, rolling up her fawn-coloured hair, the crest of whose every little wave had a golden glint. Claire stood behind her, and looked at their two reflections; herself, small and pale, and dark—perhaps even insignificant; the other taller, rosier, clear and bright. There was between them a faint family likeness, due only to the characteristic which both had inherited from their mother—the downward slant of the brows and lids at their outer corners, which gave their eyes a dreamy look. Otherwise, facially Pauline resembled their father: she was pure Norris; but she had her mother's long legs—an inheritance of which Claire was extremely envious.

"Nice eyebrows!" said Pauline, with an affected

childish intonation. "Poke the fire before you go away." And she vanished into the bathroom.

Claire deposited her outdoor clothes in her own room and went down to the back drawing-room, which was used by the whole family, and which the girls called the larder. It was shut off by folding doors from the large saloon, and in it were collected the most cherished, most familiar of those possessions which the Norrises had brought with them from Leicester to London three years ago. It was full of bad water-colours adored by the owners, hideous but beloved ornaments, ugly but comfortable chairs. There was a bureau with enough pigeon-holes to hold the papers of mother and daughters; and a revolving bookcase whose corners viciously assaulted the unwary, which shook like an aspen when knocked, but when required to revolve demanded the full strength of one arm. There were objects which had immemorial positions on the mantelpiece (and until she had mastered these positions, a new housemaid was regarded by the female Norrises as an alien enemy); a lump of blue-john brought back by Mrs. Norris from her honeymoon in Derbyshire; two Venetian glasses on dolphin pedestals, delicate as bubbles, spangled with dim gold; a delphinium-coloured Chinese enamel cigarette-box inlaid with a green and lemon dragon, and a new photograph of Mrs. Norris's sister Connie.

The sun never entered the back drawing-room in the forenoon; it had a rather dank atmosphere. Claire's first care therefore was the fire. Next she lit a cigarette, and looked out of the window, across the sooty iron balcony; the view was the same as the passage window's and her own room's. Then she began her correspondence.

When Mrs. Norris entered she did not turn, she even scribbled with an added and quite fictitious absorption. This was her customary reaction from her mother's hesitancy—her vague wandering, her gentle restlessness, her vacant fire-gazings. Claire, of all idlers the least ashamed, yet assumed an air of concentration when in

proximity with her mother, perhaps for the mere reason that she herself was inclined to stare and dream and sit unoccupied with drooping hands; it was partly, too, simply a manifestation of youth's intolerance for the idiosyncrasies of older people.

Mrs. Norris was shaped like Pauline and walked with a balanced head. Her throat had the pre-Raphaelite fullness which supports the theory of nature's tendency to imitate art. Dark hair grew high on her forehead and was drawn over her ears; it was scarcely streaked with grey. Her face, its fineness blurred by the touch of middle-age, recalled the grave pallid young men of Italian pictures, dressed with sombre richness, stoled with fur. Her dress was spasmodically embroidered, and had a pendant pocket. Mrs. Norris was nearing fifty; her daughters accused her chaffingly of living in a little world of her own.

"Well, darling," she said to Claire's busy back, shifting the chairs to and fro a little, as was her habit.

"I thought you'd gone out, mother."

"I'm going at twelve to drop Tom at the House. He has to see a man . . ." her voice trailed off.

"About a dog?" Claire prompted.

"No. He's called Montgomery."

"Oh yes, the Member."

Mrs. Norris sat down softly, as she did everything, but her feet grated the irons on the fender. "I once knew such a nice man called Montgomery. He beat copper most beautifully. But he quite went to pieces when his wife left him."

"I suppose he beat her too—or she him."

Mrs. Norris had a disconcerting way of taking flippant remarks seriously.

"After that, of course, he couldn't be a craftsman any more. He took to—I think it was casting bells."

"What a nasty come-down." Claire licked her envelope.

" Ah, but he had to work out his salvation, you see. I quite lost sight of him."

" And I suppose he's casting bells to this very day." Claire liked her tales neatly rounded off.

" Yes, dear—unless he's dead."

Presently the girl turned round in her chair and said :

" Mother, did you see old Mr. Parsons's death in the paper ? "

" Oh, my dear ! Really ? Poor old man ! I wonder what will happen to poor Clement ? "

" I can't think—he'll be horribly left."

" He has some relations, I suppose, that he can go to."

" They didn't approve of his father—you know there was some scandal."

" Yes. I often think it's rather hard how children suffer for their parents' peculiarities—it doesn't make it any easier it being in the Bible."

" ' Peculiarities ' is good. Not that most people's relations'd be much loss," said Claire.

" Perhaps not, darling ; but they are useful when your parents die," Mrs. Norris returned, without irony.

" Cherry brandy and currant cake. . . . Yes, I suppose so. But think how awful if they were patronising about the dead person. I'm sure Clement's would be. They'd behave as though he'd been handicapped by a mad father, but could be set right by a course of Bournemouth. . . . Mother, could I ask him to come here for a bit ? "

" Certainly you could, my darling."

Claire turned to her writing, but stopped to say over her shoulder :

" I say, you remember Ivor Webb ? He's on leave from France." She expected no response ; but she had reckoned without that deity, Hospitality, of whom Mrs. Norris was a sincere though uncertain worshipper.

" I'll write a note and ask him to dinner."

" No ! " said Claire.

" Why, dear ? Do you mean that Clement being here will prevent us——"

"Yes—I mean, no. It's not that. I don't want him to come."

"Really, darling? I thought you used to be such friends." Her mother was genuinely surprised; then in her "teasing" voice she added: "Is Mr. Webb one of the aversions you modern girls tell us about?"

"Well—yes," her daughter answered, taking the line of least resistance.

"Even so, Claddie, surely you needn't impose your dislikes on others? If Pauly wants him, surely you wouldn't object?"

Claire had no retort to her parent's inopportune display of a sense of justice; she sat silent, marvelling at the unerring directness of the sprite of contrariness who sometimes took possession of Mrs. Norris; the latter had no inkling of Pauline's latest flirtation—it had only begun last night; it was simply in a spirit of contradiction that she invoked Pauline's name, with unconscious pertinence, to counter Claire's opposition.

"It's fatal to talk to mother," thought Claire, not with utter injustice.

Mrs. Norris's inability to concentrate long on one subject made serious conversation very difficult. The indirect method of suggestion was the one most successfully employed with her, and the girl wished that she had used it on this occasion, especially as she had no intention of revealing the true reason for her objection to Ivor Webb. She had broached the topic impulsively, and her mother's unusual fit of reasonableness had foiled her. It now occurred to Claire that for Pauline to see the young man in her own home was preferable to her meeting him, probably in *tête-à-tête*, outside. She recalled Ivor's attitude, for instance, towards the country—motoring, boating, walking; the attitude of the actor-manager who undervalues no scene or accessory, but who regards them as of no importance on their own account—as of importance only as forming the right background, and creating the needful atmosphere for

the drama of his relationships. She therefore answered : " If Pauline wants him here, by all means let him come."

" That's a dear girl." Mrs. Norris rose, and going over to her daughter, patted her shoulder. Claire put up her hand to capture one of her mother's, which she held to her cheek. She not only loved her, she admired her, as one admires a charming, fragrant, but far from flawless work of art—a poem by Landor, a Chopin nocturne. She loved to see her mother dressed for a dinner-party in black velvet and Brussels lace, a thin glinting chain of diamonds round her neck, tall, graceful, serene, trailing across the lamp-lit drawing-room like an Orchardson heroine, grown middle-aged but retaining her mediocre decorative quality. On those festal nights Claire was wont to stand abashed by the serenity and vague dignity of her parent, feeling like a little girl before the grown-ups she deems omniscient and set above temptation and its rewards. But now, leaning her cheek against her mother's hand, she felt herself both the older and the wiser : it was Mrs. Norris who was the child ; and it was Mrs. Norris who " knew not trouble and the worm." Claire felt the weight of comparative omniscience, but was conscious of lacking serenity. Did every age, as it became the present, furnish the kicks and withhold the ha'pence ? " Soon," she thought in mock horror, " I shall begin to believe in ' happy, irresponsible, untroubled childhood ' ! "

" Mother, darling," she said, " there's twelve striking—papa will swear if you keep him waiting."

" Then it's his wicked children who teach him to ! " With which retort Mrs. Norris threaded her way between the omnipresent furniture and faded from the room.

The girl's remaining task was a letter of condolence. Clement Parsons was her friend, and yet she found no words that did not seem patronising, trite and obtrusive. Eventually she wrote as she would have spoken, from her heart :

" DEAR CLEMENT,

" I saw the announcement in the 'Times.' If you want somebody, I'll come to Sparrows. Or, if you feel gregarious now or later on, come and stay here. You can wire. Mother and father would like it. I expect you've already written, but don't unless you want to. Dear Clement, it is dreadful. You know how sorry I am.

*" Yours ever,
" CLAIRE."*

CHAPTER II

CONFIDENCE

A YOUNG man who had just emerged from the train stood looking from one to the other of the people on the platform. He was counting on Claire to meet him as she had promised. The station bewildered him, not so much by its size and clangour as by the myriad details which it presented to his senses—the contact of pushing strangers, of trucks, of eyes ; the thud of luggage and the din of voices and whistles ; the smell of train-oil and smoke and damp dirt and leather. He was used to noting in leisurely sequence or in quiet harmony a flight of birds, the blue bloom on cabbages, the limping gait of a sheep, the hum of agricultural machines, the odours of manure and bean-fields ; and his brain could register now only a confused impression of warring sounds, fugitive intersecting lines, obscure moving shapes and raw mixed but unmingled smells. . . . Then he saw Claire coming quickly through the thinning crowd, and, stooping, he caught up his two bags and went towards her. He noticed the change in her, due to her town clothes and her submission—until now unwitnessed by him—to a hat ; she carried gloves, too, and a purse, which gave her an unfamiliar look. But when he was close on her he saw the same Claire as ever look up at him with a hint of questioning in her queer dreamy brows.

For Claire, too, there was a change in her friend. His blue serge clothes, it was evident, even had she not known it, were not those he habitually wore. With his perfectly unconscious picturesque calm he had an incongruous look upon the dingy agitated platform ; and the

incongruity was exceedingly pleasant to her eyes. The associations which were inseparable from him rose up to blot out the station : downs, beech-hangers, sheepcotes, chalkpits. Her knowledge of his circumstances, which were sufficiently unusual to appeal to her sense of romance, and of his daily life, with its implications of solidity and stability and peace, gave him a symbolic significance in her mind. He suggested to her imagination one of those archaic figures in stone, simple, yet subtle, touched with austerity and yet very human. His new loneliness now that the primary influence and devotion of his life was gone, though not apparent in his outward self, lent him in her eyes a new beauty and tenderness, as though rain ran like tears down the face of the stone figure while sunset gilded it. As they stood together under the vast grimy roofs and pillars of the station, she passed through an instant of exalted sentimentality ; as they turned to go, it faded, giving way to the normal sense of pleasure at seeing him again.

They went into the tube, and emerged again into the fine drizzle of a November afternoon. The hour was not far off dusk ; a sky uniformly grey hung over the grey houses ; the railings dripped.

Clement's suit-case made a space between them so that Claire was able to glance at him without that sense of doing something intimate or important which one usually has when looking sideways at a person in close proximity.

" I'm so glad you decided to come. Father was very dubious about my going to Sparrows unchaperoned," she said.

" I nearly didn't come. If I hadn't left the farm now, I'd have stayed there for ever—until my king and country dragged me away. It's to be put up for auction."

Claire was startled. " What will you do then ? Have you any plans ? "

" Only vague ones. . . . It may be sold first by private agreement. Farlow's almost certain to buy it."

"What about the furniture?"

"I shall sell some, and store the rest. It's queer to be at a loose end."

"Queer," she echoed, adding to herself: "but I can't know how queer."

"I had a letter from Aunt Julia asking me to make my 'home' with them. It was rather decent of her, wasn't it?"

"Where's that?"

"Purley, wherever that is. It's a name one knows, but I don't place it."

"Purley? Oh dear!"

Clement smiled: "Is it as bad as that, you cockney? I do think it was nice of the old girl. Father"—he uttered the word with the shadow of a hesitation—"wasn't very soothing to her and Uncle Fred when they came to see us."

"Oh?"

"No. They rolled up in a Ford like a young Eiffel Tower. One of our Jerseys had just calved and father wouldn't talk about anything else. Uncle Fred must be rather squeamish—anyway, Aunt Julia tried to head father off by asking to see his famous 'library'"—Clement paused to grin reminiscently.

"Well?" Claire prompted.

"He stared at the old boy, who was muffled up in several layers of coats, and said: 'Yes, brother-in-law, you *look* as if a course of Rabelais would do you a world of good!' He said 'look' as if he was giving Uncle Fred the benefit of the doubt."

"I suppose you'll have to go and see them?" said Claire, after they had smiled in concert.

"Oh." The idea had evidently not occurred to Clement. "Shall I?"

"This is our street," she returned, "and"—a moment later—"this is our house."

Upon the threshold, Clement surprised her by asking if he would "have to see them all at once." He knew

her family pretty well, and had never before betrayed shyness or nervousness. "I like being alone with you, so that I can talk," he explained. Claire's pity welled up; her heart leapt out to him as they went silently across the hall; she felt awkward, too, as youth does before a grief it has not experienced. "I know nothing," she accused herself. In spite of the feeling, which she had in common with most girls concerning most boys, that she was much the older and wiser, Clement's spirit, familiar with loss, seemed to tower above her.

Knowing that probably Mrs. Norris was in the back drawing-room, she directed tea to be sent up to the "schoolroom," on the same floor as the girls' bedrooms, and where she and Clement could talk undisturbed. She showed him his room, and having taken off her things, crossed the landing and leant over the stairs to call him, but the thought of him isolated and alone in the room below checked her—she had a sudden recognition of his individuality, not unlike the startling recognition of one's own identity which occasionally occurs on looking in the mirror. "Why, that's me!" one silently exclaims, and "Why, that's Clement!" might have expressed Claire's sensation now. Within that chamber was a body like to and yet different from hers, containing a spirit, a self unknown, for ever unknowable, mysterious and alien. She had her private vision of him as one who would work steadily and clear-sightedly, acquiring new wisdom, becoming, perhaps, even famous in his own compass as a farmer; with a mind alive to new thoughts, with a heart rooted in the soil; she had pictured him torn from his chosen way of life by the war, swallowed by the army—detestable machine—made the fellow of a million dullards and dilettantes; she had mourned in advance over the probability that what was rare in him—perseverance, insight, tolerance and fairmindedness—would be lost to the world, as his freedom would be lost to him. And now she realised suddenly the inviolability of the human soul. She had endowed him with qualities as a

child endows a doll with the evil tendencies for which she slaps it ; and just as, perhaps, the puppet of wire and wax vibrates with an atomic but intense vitality too small for the child to see, so Clement existed, apart from all she thought of him, moving, as the result of a million million hidden causes, towards a destiny unknown to any. " If only I were God," she said, " I'd know it all. I'd know what would happen to him every instant of his life, and afterwards too."

Presently Clement joined her and they went into the schoolroom. This was a bleak sea-green box, containing Pauline's funereal 'cello case, and an old piano with a fretwork and blue-silk front. The hearth was insignificant. On a corner shelf stood two rows of children's books that no one was ruthless enough to throw away. The newly-lit fire and Clement's presence gave it a new look, but did not destroy its bleakness. Claire sat turned from the fire, to watch him prowl round the room, examining books and pictures. He opened the genteel piano, and softly, clumsily, struck a few notes.

" It's no use hitting middle G," she said, " it's not uttered a word for years. And one of the thin D's is still sticky where Hilary dropped golden syrup on it."

" Thin ? "

" Treble. Fat is bass."

" Did you all learn on this ? I wish I had. It was a queer kink in father."

" I never learnt, though I was taught for a long time. Hilary and Pauline were swanks at it. They used to play *Peer Gynt* with yards of temperament. The only thing that made practising bearable was having the candles lit—on winter afternoons, you know—like this. It wasn't allowed really. Once I set *The Merry Peasant* on fire." She smiled, seeing, like a picture, the old warm Leicester nursery, rich with gaslight and firelight and illicitly lighted candles.

Clement closed the lid with a snap. He, too, was

remembering. "Father hated music. It was queer, when you think of how many things he included, to cut out music. Some chaps think it's one of the most important things in education. . . . His pet aversions were bagpipes and singing."

"I don't call bagpipes music, I call them an insult. Why not hire a banshee at once? But it's odd to hate singing—although, when you come to think of it, most singing is nauseating."

"Father used to say that it was the most flagrant exhibition of sex allowed in public."

"I love tunes," said Claire, when she had mentally compared ballad-concerts and music-hall exhibitions of physique, "and I love rhythm. But I can't understand how they're glued together—I mean form in music is absolute Greek to me. I know very little about pictures, but still, I do believe I know when a picture is well painted, or well composed, or both. But if you played things to me off hand, I could no more say which was good. . . . I like proms; I like Bach, and the Ninth and the Fifth, and I know I adore some Debussy and some Ravel; but, honestly, you know, what I enjoy at proms is not the music only—though it is the music. It's—well—if I'm standing, I enjoy it because I'm standing down there with a whole crowd of people who love music; and I think: I must love it too, to stand all this while. I love the people, and feeling free and easy, and scrimmaging for coffee and burning my mouth and smoking and indulging my hatred of the conductor. And if I'm upstairs, I love to look over and see the smoky lake, just like an aquarium. . . . I think the very nicest way is just in a room with very few people."

"Will Pauline play to-night?"

"Were you looking at the 'Sarcophagus'? She scarcely ever does now. I accompany so badly. I say, Clement, shall you mind seeing people while you're here?" She paused, with raised cup, to ask him; and

before answering with a shake of the head and a half-smile, he stared at the fire ; so that she questioned his profile. He was now leaning back in the deep creaking basket-chair with the symmetrical ease of the manual worker who knows how perfectly to rest each muscle—a strongly-built young man, of medium colouring, whose eyes looked dark, but were grey, not brown, and whose clear, evenly tanned skin, rather tightly stretched at the temples and jaws, gave a look of fine simplicity to a face whose modelling was, for the rest, as bold and careless as the charcoal sketch for a portrait by a great painter.

“ I don’t know where I am with people,” he said, “ I don’t feel at ease with most of ’em. You’re different, of course. Till you came to Sparrows, I hardly saw anyone except the Farlows and sometimes the Briggses. Father and I used to play chess in the evenings, or he used to read to me—plays mostly. It all seems like a dream now.” He leaned forward, arms on knees, and stared at the fire. Claire rose gently, and put out the middle light, leaving only a hand lamp on the mantelpiece.

“ It was awfully queer,” he went on, “ though of course I took it all as a matter of course then. I knew as soon as I got big that father was a crank, but I don’t think he was half as odd as my mother—though I bet everybody thought her quite ordinary. It seems to be only if you talk about your ideas that people notice you’re different from them.”

“ Or if you look outrageous.”

“ Mother neither talked nor looked outrageous.” Clement turned his face to his companion’s, as though she set a standard by consulting which he could judge his mother more easily. “ I told you before, she died before I was twelve ? ”

Claire nodded, and, turning again to the fire, he went on :

“ We lived at Basingstoke then—from the time I was born, till she died. You knew father and she came away

from Leicestershire? Her husband was a parson there. It's funny, isn't it, that you and I come from the same county? Though mother was from Essex."

"My mother came from Gloucestershire; so it's our papas who are Midlanders. What made them go to Basingstoke?"

"Father had heard of a small holding for sale there. We lived in what I suppose was a hideous house, small and rather high and flat-looking, whitewashed."

"I know," said Claire, "one of those albino houses with no eye-brows to speak of."

"Yes. Mother got hold of her old nurse—though she wasn't so very old—and she was more or less general servant. She had her meals with us."

There was a long pause; the stream of reminiscences seemed to have been checked. Cinders tinkled in the grate; the basket-chair creaked. At last the girl prompted him.

"Tell me about your mother."

"I did lessons with her—the ordinary kind. I did Latin and history and geography after tea with father. In the afternoons father and I went out together. I used always to bang the front door—I can remember fearfully well how ripping it was to get out. Once father said, '*Must* you bang it? Italics are odious.' I'd no notion what he meant then, but I was rather ashamed of myself; and now I think I see what he meant."

"Had your mother any friends? Wasn't she lonely?"

"I expect she was. Nobody came near us. It had got about, like things do, that father and she had run away, and mother wasn't divorced."

"I wonder what she did all day?"

"Oh, she talked to nurse and sewed and read. She darned so that you couldn't see it. You know I had to learn to sew? It was one of father's ideas, like being able to use both hands. Perhaps you didn't know that I could write with my left hand?"

"No, I didn't!" But Claire's interest and curiosity

were not to be diverted. "How did she gee in with his ideas? You say she was queer, but I don't see how. I think she sounds pathetic."

"I don't think so. You know those fair Essex people?"

"Oh, she was that kind! You never said so. Now I see. No, she couldn't be pathetic: still, I feel sorry for her."

"I do, too, now. And for father, too. They must have been madly in love—or anyway, *he* must, and then it went off."

"Dreadful!" murmured Claire, with a slight shudder.

"I'll tell you why she was odd. Once a week father used to go to supper with a Catholic priest he knew. I believe sometimes they argued all night. Mother hated him. On those nights it was fearfully queer. The rest of the week seemed ordinary to me then, though I knew we weren't like other people. I thought it was rotten not going to school. Besides, though father and mother scarcely spoke to each other in the day-time, I used to hear them jawing away at nights. . . . Where had I got to? Oh yes, nurse was Scotch——"

"They always are. I suppose she was proprietary about ghosts."

"Yes. When father was out she and mother would bring out Planchette and sit with their eyes shut; and I used to be given a pencil and paper and write down what the beastly thing said. I used to think nurse cheated and looked, so that she could guide it—but I'm sure mother swallowed it all like gospel."

"Was it fun?"

"I liked it rather—and yet I dreaded it. I knew father would be angry if he found out. At about half-past nine, nurse used to say primly, 'Time Clem was in bed'—my ordinary time was eight—and mother had to stop, though she didn't want to."

"You've not told me yet what she was like, besides being fair and broad, I mean."

"She was short, and had very thick smooth fair hair—like corn, you know, but not when it's reddish; between that and when it's greenish. She used to stare a lot, in between reading and sewing. She loved to be coddled, and sometimes nurse kept her in bed for breakfast, and took her Bovril and bottles and all that, and if father found out he was fearfully fed up. Once, not very long before she died, he caught nurse slobbering over her and talking about paradise, and he threatened to turn her out of the house. . . . I was eavesdropping in the passage. But mother simply said 'No, David,' and he stopped."

Bending even nearer the fire Clement took up the poker and raked out the ashes gently. Claire wondered if this was the end of his unprecedented fit of communicativeness.

"You remind me of him," she said, recalling the proud figure of David Parsons, taller, bulkier than his son, and with quicker eyes and a more lively manner. Clement's reply surprised and touched her. "I believe I can remember everything he ever said." Then, as though to modify a boast, he turned to her, and they looked at each other steadily and in silence for a few seconds. Presently he pursued: "I thought at first I couldn't possibly leave the farm; and then I saw I couldn't possibly stay. Apart from the war, and anything else, it would have made everyday life a sort of—I can't explain it. I couldn't move an inch without remembering how he looked or did things or talked. It would have dragged me back—do you understand what I mean? I suppose I could have got used to it; but it seems better to break away and do what girls in books always do—'lead my own life.' If there wasn't the war, I'd travel."

Claire had a vision of illimitable plains, peaks and jungles, with Clement, a kind of modern palmer, staff in hand, a small black figure in a landscape. She smiled at herself for this fanciful conception of one who was by upbringing an agnostic and by nature a

countryman—shepherd or mountaineer—rather than a pilgrim.

“Yes, journeys,” she said, half to herself; but one word repeated twice or thrice in his talk echoed ominously in her ears, and she asked him, controlling a catch in her breath: “Do you mean to attest?”

“I suppose so.” His affirmative had an accent of inquiry. “What do you say? On the lowest grounds, it’d be better to enlist before they bring in a Conscription Bill.”

“Yes.” Claire’s brain was empty of thoughts. Her heart beat “war, war,” like a tedious clock. She could not deny Clement’s statement, but it seemed beside the point.

“Up till now,” he went on, “I’ve been on the land. Now I’m not. Doesn’t it make all the difference? It strikes me as fairly obvious what I ought to do.” He looked questioningly at her, gravely, not plaintively. It was not doubt that she read in his eyes, heard in his voice, it was a friend asking for friendship’s “God-speed.”

Claire made an effort to meet the discussion on the level of expediency. “Yes, I suppose it is,” she said, “and if that’s what you feel, you must—of course you must join. There’s no tenable half-way——”

“Between what?”

“Between knowing that you ought to go, and knowing that you can’t and won’t go.”

“Can’t and won’t kill, you mean? But, I say, Claire, a chap might bar killing a German, but he would defend himself—anyone would; and I don’t see any real difference between defending your own skin and defending your country, and those who can’t fight.”

“It goes further back than one can go,” she answered, feeling for words to express the vague conceptions of her mind. “To begin with: is it defence? Isn’t it offence? Oh, I know all about Belgium and France; but that alliance is surely just as artificial as any alliance; or

rather not any more intrinsically real than an alliance between us and Germany would be. But what's the good of going into all that ? ”

She was conscious of cowardice : because “ all that ” was to the point, whereas a discussion of a young man's personal obligation to fight seemed not to be ; but she was too ignorant and her opinions too nebulous for a serious argument to be possible, and if Clement wished to discuss his personal obligation she, as his friend, was bound to do so, bound in loyalty neither to shirk it for its painful implications, nor to minimise its importance. So she added with deliberation : “ I absolutely sympathise with any man who goes, and any woman who wants to go ; because it is beastly to let other people do the job and be killed *for* one. So unless you're definitely a pacifist, it is right to go, sooner or later. And, as you say, in view of conscription, preferably sooner.”

“ I don't pretend to know how much England's to blame,” he answered, harking back, “ but it's clear to me that now we are involved, it's everybody's business.”

“ Or everybody's business to try and stop it,” Claire murmured ; “ only, of course, most of them think they are all right and Germany all wrong. I wish only these beastly jingoes and imperialists had to go, and all these old fire-eaters in clubs.”

Silence fell again, and she was aware of Clement's retreat into the past once more. The fire had fallen into a red blaze. — Beyond the circle of light shed by the small lamp lay the dusky corners of the room, the old piano, the old books, the rarely opened 'cello case, and despite the glow and the warmth Claire felt a sudden shiver of apprehension, as though these inanimate objects were hostile ; she had shuddered. Was it merely the goose and the grave, or something more—a premonition ? She seemed to have recognised this room as the scene of some future sorrow, as one recognises the scene of a forgotten childhood's grief. She stared at her companion's profile, as though through him she might pierce the veil that

hangs between each moment and the next. Only because of the imperfections of that instrument, memory, are we remoter, mentally, from our childhood than from the hour just gone by. The instrument of foresight or clairvoyance which only very few are conscious of possessing, were it even as imperfect as memory and even as clumsily and instinctively used, would make the imminent hour plain to us, and this and that hour in the future more or less clear. . . Then Claire's concentration on these thoughts slackened, melted, was transformed into a sensation of happiness and ease ; and Clement, as though they had been in some subtler communion than before, sat up and said :

" I don't know why you said this room was dreary, Claire ? I thought so, too ; but now I like it. . . . I like your house. I was quite right to leave Sparrows Farm ; now I'm away I can begin again."

And indeed, it did seem as though the current of his narrative had carried away some of the bitterness of his grief—a bitterness so foreign to his affectionate but well-poised nature, that it had to be, as it were, secreted by some natural process : it could not stay in his system to corrode it. His heart was a little eased ; his companionship with Claire dispelled the dreadful unaccustomed feeling of loneliness which had succeeded his realisation of Mr. Parsons's death.

" You must take me over the house, to-morrow," he said. " I like to nose about like a dog."

" Turn about three times at least ? All right, you shall."

" Do you know, when it came to leaving, the worst thing was leaving Bond." Bond was his sheepdog.

" Oh ! " cried Claire impulsively, " couldn't you have brought him with you ? "

" To London ? No." He shook his head mournfully. " I had him shot."

Staring into the fire, their two separate trains of thought went in smoke, mingled, up the chimney, out into the

dark lake of air that stirred imperceptibly against the house-tops. The rain had ceased; a few stars were shining. Later, when they had left the room, some atmospheric change set the tides of air swinging a little, until a steady wind got up and drove London's pall of smoke one way all the night long.

CHAPTER III

FAMILY LIFE

THE Norrises' large dining-room was formal, but simple and not heavy, though rather too many William Morris designs were present in it ; floral parterres on the walls, canaries and Tudor roses on the curtains, vague ocean-shapes upon the carpets—large pale shells and indeterminate dolphins. Opposite the windows hung a portrait of Mrs. Norris in the Rosetti manner, with the fullness of her throat, the pallor of her face, the blackness of her hair much exaggerated, and over the hearth a bad full-size copy of Ford Madox Brown's *Work*, executed by a poor and remote relation to whom the Norrises had been consistently kind, until, with base ingratitude, she married the scion of a noble house, became "county," and wrote them patronising letters. The picture was known as "*Millie's Work*"—an adapted version of its earlier title "*Poor Millie's Work*." The girls regarded it with a tolerant scornful affection.

The room's spaciousness was enhanced by the gracious dignity of the Georgian street outside. It was the antithesis of the immemorial London dining-room of heavy crimson and mahogany, studies of still life, and dark leather ; it was provincial and charmingly out of date.

For a sensitive visitor the Norris breakfast was an ordeal. Mr. Norris, always the first down, watched over a double barrier of eye-glasses and paper, the arrival of his guest, wife and children. With the nonchalance of habit, his daughters placed their cheeks against his, and saluted the air. Next he referred to the presence or

absence of letters by their plates. If either of them was unusually late his eyes descended, as it were, upon the inner side of the barrier to consult his watch. Claire and Pauline had an unspoken agreement to ignore this silent criticism and the remarks about their correspondence. The atmosphere was easy, but not genial; easy with indifference, and not with complete confidence; for though the latter existed between husband and wife, it did not between parents and children, and whereas its absence was accepted contentedly and unquestioningly by the mother, the father fretted secretly against it. He had often longed for sons to enter his business, and he still sometimes wanted them to discuss his political ambitions and his chances as a candidate. There was irony in the fact of his aversion to his adopted daughter Hilary, for of his children she it was who could best have taken the place of a son to him.

When Clement entered the dining-room, he found his host already slitting envelopes and dropping them into the basket by his chair.

"Did you sleep well? Did you have a good bath?"

"Yes, thanks," the young man answered.

"It's a good bathroom, eh? I had all those gimcracks put in new the other day."

Clement reflected briefly on the complicated array of taps, which caused jets of water to assault you in unexpected quarters. "It's a splendid bathroom," he said. "You're a nice old chap, too," he added to himself, for to the young man Tom Norris appeared old, although he was not sixty, and had exquisitely irregular false teeth. His hair, once fair, was blanched and thick above a ruddy short face; his small wide opened blue eyes were both shrewd and candid, they betrayed the limits of his mind, not, as some eyes do, the vistas. He wore morning dress; a stand-up collar with a dark folded cravat and a pearl pin; the points of the collar, instead of being turned back, irritated his chin. A very fine chain of alternate gold and platinum links showed discreetly on

his stomach ; he wore a wedding, but not a signet ring on his short-fingered hands. He was short—"stocky"—and successful looking ; but something, perhaps his eyes, suggested that his success was due to power of concentration, not to wide understanding nor to passion, that he employed foresight but not imagination, that he used the moment for his purpose, and cast it by without thought for its eternal significance. Work was his pleasure (though this he never admitted in the presence of a woman) but pleasure in the accepted sense he kept strictly separate from business, as also religion, sentiment, natural generosity and abstract principles of morality. He openly accused those who dovetailed the two departments of life of softness and crankism. He belonged to the old-fashioned class of employers who had not yet recognised the sound business reasons for paying employees a living wage.

That such his host was, Clement only dimly and fragmentally perceived ; the young man had not the art of deliberately judging character : he "sized people up" chiefly by means of intuition ; the powers of observation highly-trained in regard to live-stock, birds, weather-signals and the state of the soil did not come into play when he was face to face with his own kind. Nor did he express to himself the things he did perceive ; he had not the habit of giving thoughts the form of words, which crystallises and sometimes mutilates them. He had played chiefly the rôle of listener, so far, to a talkative father. His opinions had inevitably been coloured rather by the convictions of that vivid personality which had hitherto ruled his life ; and, one of these convictions being that "sound business capacity" was a synonym for, at worst, dishonesty in trade relations, and at best, a tendency to crooked thinking and crooked dealing, Clement had a slight prejudice against business men. This prejudice was, however, so slight as to be almost inoperative ; his natural fairmindedness always counteracted it at the critical moment, and he

judged Mr. Norris, as he did every one he met, on his own merits, and found him a "nice old boy." He had, besides, a real respect for the very thing that would have made the nice old boy a suspect character to old Mr. Parsons: the proved ability to control hundreds of workers and thousands of pounds. He, Clement, could not even control a flock of sheep without Bond's help.

"What are the plans for to-day?" Mr. Norris asked, with a skilful mingling of disapproval and friendliness; he tacitly criticised all youth's pleasures, but he remained polite.

"I don't know that there are any," replied Clement.

His host grunted: "I thought . . . it seemed to me there was—wasn't there some talk of a party?"

"I don't think there was for to-day," Clement answered, feeling first apologetic, and then—as there was no reason for apology—slightly resentful; "it's a party for later on, perhaps," he added.

"'Sufficient unto the day,'" his host quoted, pleasantly grim. "We don't know what to-morrow will bring forth," he went on, vaguely Biblical in tone, "now we're struggling with these devils." He used the epithet with a naïve air of being licentious. "And I tell you, if we haven't beaten them by this time next year, we shall be eating the herbs of the field, like Nebuchadnezzar."

Clement was not accustomed to war small-talk. To say something, he answered: "I know fodder's going to be short."

"I was as hopeful as anybody, I dare say, during the first few months," the older man pursued, "but I can see now we're in for a two years' fight at least."

Claire entered; she looked with quick inquiry from the younger to the older man, and then asked after the latter's cough. His reply was, "There's a letter for you, Claddie."

She went without answering to the coffee pot, and made some trivial remark to Clement. Then dutifully: "Is it the Blind Officers to-day, father?"

"Yes. And then—and the Belgians."

"Not on approval for us?" She paused in her action to catch the answer in his face, and, seeing Clement's grin at her anxious tone, she added: "Never again, I trust!"

"Somebody's got to have them," Mr. Norris retorted.

"Poor things." She did not make it clear which party she pitied. Probably both, Clement thought.

"But why be like that?" she pursued, "dirty and lazy and ungrateful?"

"That's what—that's just what the working-class in Eng——" Mr. Norris suddenly realised that this was a pre-war sentiment: the "working-class man" had now become "our lads at the Front," and must not be traduced. "England," he amended with pleased solemnity, "England's always stood up for small nations. We went in to revenge Belgium. Now we're—defending—we're fighting for liberty and permanent peace."

"Oh!" said Claire softly, with downcast eyes, and looking rather miserable, "but then . . . Ireland——"

"Don't—I'll trouble you, Claddie dear, not to bring those ideas to this table." He went on cutting bread with imperturbable amiability in his little red face. "I can't prevent you having friends with—we'll say, acquaintances, with wicked and foolish notions, but don't air them here."

Clement felt embarrassed, in spite of the complete absence of anger in his host's voice, or of distress in Claire's face. Indeed, she was smiling: her father's phrase had conjured up a vision of "unmentionable" feminine garments hung up to air in the dining-room.

"They're wrong notions and foolish," repeated Mr. Norris, as though blaming not his daughter, but those who led her astray. "When we've crushed 'em—the Huns—then will be the time to—to discuss it. They must be crushed." He munched stolidly; his little open blue eyes shone, where he sat opposite the light.

A look of disgust had passed quickly across Claire's

face at his words, but after an instant she smiled at her friend and said: "Father's dreadfully bloodthirsty!"

"Well, I'm English." As the older man uttered this, his wife came trailing into the room, and said: "English, dear? Of course. Good morning, Clement. Well, darling—who says you aren't English, Tom?"

She sat down at the window end of the table, and began to press food on each of the others in turn. "Ring for some more hot milk, darling," she told Claire.

"But there's another jug on the sluggard, mother dear."

"I'm going to the Depot this morning, Claire," the lady went on, but looking at the young man, "so you and Pauline must look after Clement."

"Of course, mother."

"I shall be quite all right," said he, flushing a little at this formality.

"Here's a letter from Hilary," Mrs. Norris announced, looking at the thin envelope in her hand without opening it.

"Oh, how is she?" the young man asked, realising that he had omitted to ask after the absent member of the family.

"She's reported to be coming home," Claire answered, as though quoting a newspaper paragraph. "But Hilary's movements rather come in bursts. I mean, she'll decide suddenly to come home and then come."

"If she can get here," Tom Norris amended grimly. He much preferred his own daughters, Claire and Pauline, to his adopted daughter, although he was punctiliously impartial in his superficial treatment of all three; his pride and elementary sense of justice demanded that. He would never for a moment forget what Mrs. Norris had apparently forgotten long ago—that Hilary was not the child of his body. His wife's diffused, stable, mild light of love was shed equally on the three girls: but his clannish blood-is-thicker-than-water secret paternal passion distinguished perpetually between Claddie and

Pauly, who were his, and Hilary Monk, his wife's orphan niece, who was "Miss Norris" by courtesy alone. Outwardly, he had met Hilary's proposal to go to India with some friends of her real father's with hostility, apparently on the grounds that it clashed with her intention of going to College, a scheme to which she had just received his grudging consent; but inwardly her plan of travel was applauded by him as eminently suitable, and his opposition was mere conventionality. Her departure was a relief; the imminence of her return after three years was disquieting.

After several false starts, Mrs. Norris began to read her letter. "'It is horribly cold here . . . I don't like Petrograd as much as Moscow . . . Although it is the most wonderful town . . . Lady Georgina . . .'"

"Is there anything about her coming back, mother?"

"No-o. M'm. Lady Georgina comes herself to the hospital, Hilary says, Tom."

"Well, that won't hurt her," said Claire.

"Now Claddie, now Claddie, don't interrupt your mother."

"Perhaps . . . m'm . . . I shall be back in April. It would be delicious to be in England for the spring. Think! I've hardly seen Sparrows,—Isn't that strange, Tom—I'd never thought of it. Claddie, did you realise . . . ?"

"No, I don't think I did. Of course, we'd only just taken it—no, I don't believe we'd even decided. D'you remember, you and I went down for the day; and then father and you and I went down again? Just after we'd signed the lease for this."

Mr Norris blew his nose; his silence was a trifle marked.

"Have some jam—do, Clement. It's delicious plum jam," said Mrs. Norris, dropping the letter to the floor, from which Claire rescued it.

"I've got treacle, thanks awfully."

"Tom, dear, won't you try some of this plum jam? Aunt Connie sent it to us."

"I've finished, dear," her husband answered, coming round to pat her shoulder. With a gesture like Claire's she captured his hand with hers. "I shan't be in to lunch," he went on. "If I've time, I shall go to the Red Cross Sale at Christie's. Ah, here's Pauly. Good morning to your nightcap."

"Good morning," said Pauline to nobody in particular.

With his unsmiling jocularly her father said: "Only one letter to-day out of the whole crew, Pauly."

When he had gone, there was a perceptible easing of the atmosphere.

"How's the war?" Mrs. Norris inquired politely, and did not listen while Clement read out the head-lines. When he had finished, and she had put down the coffee-pot which had kept her busy, she nodded at him wisely and vaguely with an expression of complete trust, as though he were an evangelist. Her unquestioning faith in male wisdom was as much a joke with her daughters as was her dreaminess.

Meanwhile Pauline, having read her letter, tossed it over to Claire with a slight grimace. Clement noticed with the tail of his eye the poise of her figure, the graceful jerk of her hand as she sent the sheet accurately into Claire's plate; there was nothing inconclusive or blurred about her least actions; they had the unconscious grace and cleanness that one sees in trained athletes. Her perfect health and poise affected Clement pleasantly; it was complementary, not essential to her prettiness, which was compact of clear colouring and well proportioned features; together, grace and prettiness made something very like beauty—what would, at all events, generally pass for beauty. Claire had her sister's poise but not her length of limb; her restraint of feature with added fineness and individuality—but not her colour. Clement deliberately compared the two girls: he was going to take people in now he was in London! But the comparison had no implications—no significance for him beyond its superficial interest. He was not in love with

either. In one he had complete confidence: in the other the completest indifference towards him was plain: that was how their relationship to himself struck him.

Pauline moved softly humming about the room, holding her cup. When Clement turned from opening the door for Mrs. Norris he saw her smiling secretly to herself, standing behind her sister's chair. Claire handed up the letter, without raising her eyes above their ordinary level. "Thanks," she said. Pauline put down her cup, and lit a cigarette. Clement caught himself looking for a repetition of the smile; he hadn't quite got the hang of it; it was something rather odd and jolly in the way of smiles. He sat down in Pauline's own place, opposite her, where she stood behind Claire, blowing smoke through her nostrils, with narrowed eyes and lifted chin. Claire munched silently. Presently Pauline dropped her chin, and said: "Well!" He noticed her wide-open grey eyes—Tom Norris's—fringed with thick short lightish-brown lashes, the colour of her hair—only *that* had brighter specks in it.

"Well what?" said Claire.

"What about it?" said Pauline in a challenging tone, rustling the letter.

But her sister refused to take up the challenge. She temporised with a question: "Why 'dear goose'?"

"Can't think. Must I account for Ivor's little decorations? Claire, you and your whys——!"

"Did you write to him?"

"Bright girl. Three times, if you want to know. Perhaps I said something gooseish: I don't remember. It can be dear dados of processing geese for all I care."

"Three times in three weeks? Rather a lot for you."

"Eighteen days to be accurate."

Claire apparently had no reply to this. She rose, and saying to the young man: "Come up when you've had a pipe. Cigarettes are allowed in the back drawing-room, but not pipes," left the room.

Pauline fidgeted, but not because of him, he knew. He was non-existent as far as she was concerned ; and yet somehow he liked being there, to see her walk the length of the room to glance out of the window, and back to flick her ash into the grate. He had never craved attention ; and to be ignored now was no more irksome than to be ignored by the lambs at pasture or the hawk in the air. He loved to see the hawk's quiver and swoop, and the lamb's uncertain runs and jerks this way and that, or their patient following of their dams. As he sat motionless on the hill the living things ignored him ; thus did Pauline Norris. Only once had she taken direct cognisance of him when, at Sparrows, an expected youth had failed her ; she lacked a gallant for a whole week-end, the drop-scene of downland and orchard was vacant and meaningless for her, lacking the persons of the delicate comedy of flirtation. Columbine glanced round for Harlequin's understudy ; the stage manager was fairly on the spot—she perceived Clement Parsons. He was adopted as her cavalier for a Saturday picnic and Sunday tennis. Faintly amused, he had played the part as well as he was able, but that was not very well. He had not the Londoner's art of repartee and innuendo, and he was not in love with the heroine. On the Monday his figure once more retreated into the middle distance.

As he watched her now he recognised how she fitted London, this house, even this patterned old-fashioned room, better than even the shaven lawn in front of Sparrows—far better than the farm-yard and hollyhock walks of Sparrows Farm, his old home. Yes, in spite of her living health and radiance and long limbs, she was a town-girl ; she had the town-girl's—what was it ?—complacency ? no, self-possession. She was sophisticated. Her very restlessness this morning was part of the intermittent toot of taxi-cabs, the hum of Westminster traffic. Her dress was the sophisticated morning dress of the town-bred. Clement, exaggerating for his own amusement the girl's characteristics, exaggerated

too, his own. He liked to think of himself as a bumpkin, a lout : " oaf " was Claire's word.

" Am I an oaf ? " he suddenly asked her, smiling across the room.

Pauline paused in her pacing with a light look of surprise. " Oaf ? Well, no : not too dreadfully oafish," she answered, her preoccupation suddenly vanished. " Why, whose been accusing you of it ? Claire ? Father ?—father's too spry for words at brekker. But still, he's a polite old soul. No, it must have been Claddie. Abominable ! An ' oaf ' ? Oh, no, believe me, Clement, take it from me, kid——" she waved her letter at him as she reached the door, opened it, and was gone.

Left with an impression of idle good-humoured vivacity, the young man sat, smoking and in meditation. Since his talk with Claire last evening—it seemed some while ago—the sharpest of his sorrow had gone, his extreme loneliness was relieved. He did not analyse this partially recovered ease of heart, but merely tasted and enjoyed it. He did not even trace it to that hour of confidence and loosened speech. He simply knew that he could now " begin again " in a way that, during the first dreadful days of grief, he had believed to be impossible. That this beginning again might lead him to a swift end did not enter into his thoughts. He sat, in the midst of warmth, comfort, kindness, contemplating life ; and life had, not only a secret smile, but a gay, ambiguous, incomplete and mocking word to say, which summoned him on, out into the future.

CHAPTER IV

THE SCRUPULOUS SOUL

THE small sitting-room seemed crowded and chill after the warm, scented spaciousness of the dining-room. The reason was that Claire had the long window open, and was standing on the little iron balcony. She did not hear him enter, and he went quietly to the fire with a slight feeling of disillusionment—one he did not recognise. Without giving it his full attention he opened the paper.

Claire stared up at the sky, and down at the court, where pigeons ruffled and pecked. The wind caught a strand of her hair and then, slipping under, caressed her scalp with a cool touch, and subsided. But it was stronger up over the roofs, and blew the zenith-full of pale grey, monotonous clouds continually one way. Through them, the hidden sun shed an even silvery day upon the town. "At sunset"—she quoted Clement to herself—"after a day like this, the wind will drop, and rain fall." Between her and sunset stretched the breeze-haunted silver hours of a November day. It was early, for Londoners—only ten. She looked from day-spring to sunset, and the hours seemed rich with promise. What makes a day busy? The number of different things done or different people seen? For workers, poor things, the absence of interlude to toil, the dearth of slack moments; for lovers, the amount of time spent with the beloved. "An empty day" . . . She knew now what made the coming hours seem rich. At that moment instinct made her glance over her shoulder; there Clement was, but still she stayed outside watching him. The interior, his setting, had a calm benignant look; her entrance

acquired thereby a symbolic importance, and as though in preparation for the rite she turned once more to the outer air. As she did so one small portion of the fabric of grey cloud thinned, shredded away, and through the chink she saw a fragment of pale blue, incredibly remote and pure, a pool of heaven. The ravelled edges of cloud merged again but not before Claire's imagination had scaled the ramparts of the air and escaped through the interstice into the blue meadows beyond.

She closed the window. Clement stood with the whole breadth of the *Times* between them, but the barrier did not daunt her. She felt a trifle exalted, and yet composed, sure of herself and of the ground under her feet; not intoxicated. She put up her hand to her face, and stood staring at the back of the *Times* with a serious expression. Clement, glancing over the top, noticed her air, perceived too, somehow, her exaltation and deliberately looked down again. His unexplained sensation of disillusionment was replaced by one of uneasiness, but he did not betray it. Claire, however, with a sudden change of mood, began to talk.

"What do men read the paper for?—the news, or what the journalists say? It's dreadful to be unique—I can't bear the papers."

"I read them for the communiqués."

"Oh well, I understand that. I'm broadminded to a certain point; about half a yard. How *can* people lap up Northcliffe, Southbluff, Wombat Weir & Co.? Or, if it comes to that, Cocoa?"

"Perhaps you prefer the *Spectator*?" the young man suggested, tossing down the *Times*.

"Ye—es. Ovaltine's not such bad stuff. Soothing."

Did our mothers and fathers scintillate? If so, conversation has declined. There is levity now, catching slang, and "back chat," but wit and even humour are far rarer than intellect, beauty, talent. The Norrises and their close friends, like every other clique or family, were amused by their own jokes.

"I like the law reports, though," Claire went on, sitting on the arm of a chair, and setting the bookcase on the turn. "I love a nice murder or a nice breach of promise. I shall never, oh never, forget the Seddon trial when he made the sign of the widow's son at the judge. If only I'd been there! But the judge wasn't having any."

"What *are* you talking about?"

"'Are you a mason?' and all that. Sometimes the servants lend me their *Lloyd's News*. Mr. Lloyd is a nut at murders; he has a corner in crimes—ones the innocent other papers have never heard of."

"How jolly."

"Yes, isn't it? Or perhaps they're too respectable." She went to the fire, and her eyes fell on a head-line. "It seems rotten to be so happy," she added.

"Why rotten?"

"When there's a war on. Yet I didn't think it wrong to be happy when there was only starvation and sweating and prisons and so on——"

"Don't be morbid."

"Morbid!" Claire was outraged.

"You are if you talk like that. It's no use being unhappy—it doesn't help."

"But if I don't do war-work, oughtn't I to do something else?"

"No." It was the first time the rôles had been thus reversed,—Claire tacitly asking advice, Clement giving it.

"Doesn't it show I'm a heartless beast if I can be happy in spite of the war?"

"No. Anyway, heartlessness is only compar——"

"Certainly not. There's an absolute heartlessness laid up in heaven, in the next compartment to Plato's—cow, was it?"

"?"

"Oh, never mind. Quite off the point. . . . What shall we do to-day?"

Clement didn't answer. She stood with her hand on

the mantelpiece, which, not yet warmed by the fire, felt chilly. The silence, too, chilled her, and glancing at Clement, her vague dis-ease took form. He stood with his head cocked, listening. Only then did her ears catch the sound of a piano, breaking the quiet of the house: Pauline was playing in the schoolroom, something quick, pretentious, bombastic, with vast runs, arpeggios and chords, which reached them, muted and robbed of sequence by intervening walls and ceilings.

"What about the others?" he finally asked.

Claire let out the breath she had unconsciously been holding. A djinn of jealousy rose in her mind, and towered, shadowing the world. It said something in a voice too loud for her to hear. With a sharp effort of will she forced it back into its prisoning phial, and stoppered it. Her instinct was thereupon to slide over the significance of his question with a generalisation, but she was too proud to allow herself the easier way. She must verbally recognise his interest. "Pauline is motoring to Hindhead," she said. "Perhaps to-morrow we might do something all together. Shall we go for a walk in the country—to-morrow, I mean? Though it looks uncertain." She glanced out of the window.

"We shall be able to tell to-night about the weather."

"You mean *you* will," she said with a smile. Then in an attempt to recapture her happiness of a few moments ago, she went on. "What shall we do to-day? Will you come with me to see the Lincolns? They might come walking to-morrow."

"Yes, let's." Clement's agreement rang true; he clearly had no lingering regrets that Pauline was not to be of their company; it was Claire who suffered. The beauty of her day was darkened by the memory of that cold overshadowing passion of resentment; the richness of the hours before her was tarnished gold now. She felt cold and remote and grey like the clouds, not exquisitely, exaltedly remote like that blue crevice in the sky. It was with tolerant amusement that she heard her

sister's 'cello begin to groan. Pauline was making up for months of idleness.

She and Clement walked across the park, and climbed on the top of an eastward-going bus. A slim middle-aged woman on horseback passed them whose horse, shying a little, seemed to curtsy left and right. Claire turned her head to admire the rider's neat form, uprightness and easy, firm control. She thought, How well women compared with men in looks and superficial ability, especially in looks. "One likes men in *spite* of their appearance," she said to herself, "Yes, even nice-looking men you'd love not because, never because of their looks. But so many women are graceful or pretty or even beautiful."

The bus roared up Piccadilly, which was like a wide grey hard-wood floor; like the ideal *piste* on which errand boys skate in dreams, where there is just enough danger of collision to add a zest to sport. The vehicles seemed to bowl, to glide, to falter, like clockwork toys; beautiful ungainly parti-coloured buses, drays of rounded barrels, grass-green taxis, fawn-coloured and pearl-grey and glossy blue private cars, absurd trade-tricycles, and those sinister closed broughams wherein—straitly entrenched between high tiers of cardboard boxes—dwell nomad members of a race surely alien from ours. A block stopped them by the Ritz, so that Claire could enjoy the discreet vista of Berkeley Street. She regretted that her tyrannous schoolgirl choice had not fallen on a house in the region of that sumptuous knoll, Hay Hill. *Westminster* had the right sound, it was true, and the right spacious look and feel, and it was unvexed by modernity, dignified, secure; but how much more charming were the dingy aristocratic purlieus of Mayfair with their absurd names: John Street, Charles Street, Curzon, Clarges, Conduit and Half-Moon. And then, nearby were Shepherds' Market, Glasshouse, and Windmill Streets, and the disillusioning quotidian smells and sameness of the Italian quarter. If one lived here the

Roman Catholic Cathedral, reared like a watch tower in the South, would be the object of devout pilgrimage, instead of being ignored through sheer proximity.

"I want to go to Dublin," Claire announced suddenly, her thoughts having returned to Queen Anne's Gate and Buckingham Gate, and thence to other Georgian residences. "I think Merrion Square must be very like our street, only stiffer with people thinking; that's the idea you get from George Moore. Westminster is chiefly looks. If it depended on active thought to keep it up, it would fall to bits--unless superstitious reverence for the Stores did the trick."

Clement was often a trifle bewildered by her talk; being three paces behind as it were, he repeated "Dublin?" But Claire let it drop, and went on to speak of Bloomsbury, where the Lincolns lived. It was a ripping part, but of course out of the question for provincials like the Norrises, and with her papa's ideas of what was due to wealth. Clement chaffed her about her impersonal manner of touching on family foibles: "As if you weren't a Norris," he said.

"I don't feel peculiarly Norris," she answered, "I might equally well be a Parsons—or a Lincoln or something." Self-conscious for one instant, she glanced sideways at the young man, but apparently her words conveyed only what she had intended; their possible significance was only, she reflected, a vulgar afterthought of her own, at which she flushed a little. She looked away across the circus, and let the din and clamour fill her ears. Remembering her strictures concerning men's looks, she turned again to examine her companion's face; it had no lines and no spare skin; but the effect was not one of extreme youth and inexperience, it was of extreme serenity of heart and symmetry of mind. In the days of neuroses, strained eyes and lips, twisted eyebrows, insomnia and querulousness, Clement retained his mental poise, his facial symmetry, his tranquility, his sleep, not out of dull, unimaginative stupidity and callousness—for

he was indeed no oaf—but because these qualities were so securely his by heritage and temperament and early training that as long as he lived he would remain and even look almost unchanged. Claire remembered the one cocked eyebrow of old David Parsons—oh, certainly, Clement's peculiar gravity was not his by the tame method of heredity only, though some of it was, of course, drawn from his mother's passive nature and his father's passionate love of truth and justice ; but the quality was more intensely personal than that ; it was the very thing which would have made him scarcely recognisable from his fellows had he been educated at a public school. Claire saw the paradox in this ; that what made him unusual made him ordinary ; she could no other way express what she felt to be a truth. Perhaps the serenity of most boys was "faked" ; an elaborately prepared, half-consciously assumed disguise, which, when put to the test of wear and tear, of trouble, of love, of war, crumbled to pieces, and betrayed uneasy hearts, ill-balanced minds, emotions misunderstood and misdirected. Was this what separated Clement from those whom, but for his crankish upbringing, he would so closely have resembled ? Was he the genuine, they the spurious ? Her eyes resting on his thick hair, she asked : " Had your mother a lot of hair ? "

" Yes, a lot of fair hair—very thick and smooth."

" I know ; fearfully hard to do—the fine, heavy kind."

" She used to wear it in plaits round her head. Sometimes when she had a headache, she took it down, and the plaits hung down each side. Then father called her Gretchen or Marguerite."

They did not speak until the bus had reached Tottenham Court Road."

" We're nearly there," said Claire ; and then, becoming aware of a desire in him to express something he found difficult, she added : " What is it, Clement ? "

" I've been thinking—I've decided, Claire, I must join up. And I do want you to agree." The instant of

hesitancy in his speech did not convey doubt to her ; it was not an emotional break, and left his decision unmodified. He turned his head to her with an obvious effort, as though by sheer will against a weight of air, and with his eyes he emphasised his longing for approval, for encouragement, for support. But perceiving this, she still kept her eyes before her, resisting for the moment that demand—there was nothing, she knew, that she could refuse him finally. Even when she turned her face she found no words. Only when he had said : “ Is that right ?—aren’t I right ? ” did she bring out an answer. “ Yes, it’s quite right, quite all right.” The repetition of simple words, which constant use had made almost meaningless, eased her mood. The poignant silence, the constricted sensation at her heart, the danger, passed. A barrier of familiar sounds had separated them ; she could meet his watchful eyes without fear, almost without emotion. The danger had lain in the fact that what she had to give was so much greater than what he asked of her ; she must give just what he asked and no more—must not let him know there *was* more ; must set up the barrier, let down the portcullis, before all the inmates of her eyes rushed out and overwhelmed him. She was satisfied that on this occasion, at all events, she had judged accurately ; her words, spoken with conviction, had carried the needful weight of affection, friendship, sympathy, support, and no more. Clement sat quietly by. The bus was stopped at Mudie’s corner, and on an impulse Claire rose, summoned him with a touch, and they stepped off, just as it gathered speed again.

“ Is it here ? ” he asked.

“ No, farther on ; only I thought we’d walk a little.”

“ Right. Tell me about these Lincolns.”

Claire attempted a few words, but she was too heartsick to talk. Her private Clement was already under assault, and though not war nor death could dislodge him, he seemed doomed to some faint reflection of the real Clement’s fate. That clear image whistled by the sheep-

cotes, stooped to labour, rose up to plough ; and there was about him a dreadful, dreaded pathos, in the light of the real Clement's decision. The disparity between them was like a division in her own mind, a cleft, a wound ; it hurt her. At last, still, low, steady over her hidden pain, words came to her : " You couldn't—of course—simply have stayed on the land." It was an assurance addressed to herself, and Clement agreed with a nod. Then he added :

" They're asking for women for the land."

" You aren't replaceable !" Claire defended her inner conviction.

" O Lord, yes ! There are plenty of chaps too old for the army—lots of old shepherds who'll turn out again now." He spoke in an easy, boyish voice, scouting her notion of his immense value. If she had been in danger of forgetting his youth and inexperience, his way of speaking would often have reminded her ; but she never did forget it. It was that which kept her on guard, warily, though unwillingly, against a betrayal of herself. Her feeling of protectiveness towards him came in force again, and made it impossible to take advantage of her influence over him, of his dependence on her. Had he been older, or had he been merely older for his age, and her advantage less, she could have used any power she had ; but because she felt certain of her power, at least temporarily, she had to keep it hidden, sheathed like a weapon. She had acted thus without thought, by an instinct of scrupulous chivalry ; but her reflection upheld her instinct—that the beloved, because he did not know his danger, must go not only unscathed, but without a glimpse of the bright sword.

Their visit to Henrietta, who was in the midst of cleaning the flat, was short. They agreed on a train, a rendezvous, and a goal for their walk, and left her to her hated tasks. They passed from Bloomsbury into the pale Parisian vista of Kingsway. Claire, in spite of all she

could not say, was happy again. She needed to torment herself with no vision of ecstasy; the pleasure of companionship had an exquisite, a perfect flavour. All her faculties were broad awake, she felt a fuller tide than usual along her veins, but so little did she show outwardly, so far was she from a flush or a heightened air or shining eyes, that Clement accused her of dreaminess.

"Dreaminess!" she exclaimed indignantly. "Oh no, you might know me better."

"I know what a lot goes on inside," he answered, smiling. "But what it all is, is a mystery. Of course, if you say it's deep thought——!"

"I often try to tell you; I did this morning."

"Are you being morbid again?"

"No. I was only pointing out that I did sometimes tell you. I don't *want* to be mysterious. Besides, I'm not."

"Well, what were you meditating just now?"

"I wasn't," Claire protested. "You know the way sometimes you feel so much and so calmly it's like thinking? It seems quite enough just to live. . . ."

"I know. Like when . . ." the young man paused, but as she didn't prompt him, went on—"when it's fine weather."

"Ye-es. But not sleepy and not excited—more the feeling of a dream. I think it must be like the waves of strength that mother says comes to women in labour—only it isn't so much waves as a stream."

"Isn't that what vitality is?"

"I suppose so, only it's so horribly near to 'vivacity' that I loathe the word."

"How you do chop straws over words, Claire; it's a rotten habit."

"Well, why talk if you don't say exactly what you mean?"

They crossed the Strand, and walked along the Embankment, beside the clanging trams, to Westminster.

"I shall go for the Artillery I think," Clement remarked

presently ; and Claire's profound composure was proof against the buffet of his words.

" Yes, do," she answered, with spontaneous sympathy.

" You mean because it's safer ? " he asked, turning to her from his thoughts, and there was a shadow of anxiety in his face.

" No ; I hadn't thought of that ; though that might have been the reason."

" Why, then ? You're being a puzzle to-day."

" Well, I suppose because if you want to go into the artillery, I want you to, too."

Clement was satisfied, and at once she saw his thoughts set off again away from her, though now and then he brought back his discoveries, as a child brings short-stemmed flowers to the guardian who walks staidly behind it, or as a highly-occupied dog checks its career, now and then, and comes back to encourage its owner. He left her at the house door to go on an errand to the post office, and she went with unmarred happiness up to her room.

In a short while Pauline came in.

" Hallo, didn't you go after all ? "

" Enid's got chicken-pox. Isn't it the limit ? I'm furious." Nevertheless, a glint of some other emotion—surprise tinged with curiosity and amusement—replaced discontent in her bright, unambiguous face. " My dear, there is a *gift of roses* waiting for you downstairs."

" For me ? "

" Yes. I met Clement in Victoria Street and we were coming home together when he suddenly dived into Ernest's and came out with some roses. I thought for a minute they were for me. Come and be presented. He's in the larder with them." She appeared anxious to witness the event.

Claire was silent. They went down together to the back drawing-room, and the young man gave her the flowers, which were deep crimson and of perfect shape.

" Oh, Clement, how beautiful. Thank you so much.

What lovely long buds, just uncurling. May I have them up in my room ? ”

“ Selfish beast,” said Pauline.

“ I shall just be selfish, then. I can’t gloat over them down here.”

“ Weird animal ! ” Pauline remarked to their companion. “ You’d think we never saw a flower, and were too poverty-stricken to buy them.”

He looked unsmiling from one to the other.

“ After all,” said Claire, “ one doesn’t buy oneself roses.” She kept them by her place throughout lunch, at which both girls noticed that Clement talked more than usual. When Pauline remarked on his volubility, he looked at her in silence for a few moments ; and then Claire perceived the faintest possible blush creep over his tanned face. A still brief instant of intuition told her then that the impulse to buy the roses had been inspired by his chance meeting with Pauline ; and the fact that the gift of them was made to herself betokened no conscious duplicity in the candid soul of Clement. The innocent duplicity, however, was there ; and Claire perceived it. It was with the infinite care employed in touching a wound that, up in her own room after lunch, she arranged the crimson roses in a jar. Meanwhile, she preserved composure in her face ; and having wiped away a few soundless tears, which had distilled themselves as from the eyelids of a delicate mask, she went downstairs to sit with her family.

CHAPTER V

A COCKNEY OUTING

SUNDAY morning was one of crisp glory. Shadow lay like deep cold water along one side of the street ; the other was washed with gold. Beyond the roof-tops arched the cloudless pale crystal blue.

The Norrises and Clement met the Lincolns at Victoria Station. Lucy Lincoln overtopped the rest by far—they were conscious of his height as they stood by the booking-office exchanging coins and jests. It was height and not size that marked him out, for he was very thin. He wore the most ancient discoloured clothes, and carried a rucksack. Between the extremes of his disreputable appearance and Pauline's Bond Street tweeds and brogues the other three varied in degrees of neatness and newness ; Clement and Claire in worn but respectable country clothes, and Henrietta in a Burberry and a straw hat, once vermilion, faded now to a pastel red, crammed on her head with an instinct for the right angle. Staring at Pauline in admiration she murmured to Claire, "*Country Life*, what ? "

"Immaculate," Claire responded.

"Yes, yes. 'Immaculate tweeds'—the only conceivable expression. I say, Pauline, we've just linked you up with an immaculate conception. But not by the laying on of hands——"

"Stow it," her brother interrupted, blinking away and gulping down his amusement in view of Pauline's chill blankness, and Claire's flicker of enchanted horror. They two had often to combine to cover the tracks of the *enfant terrible*, her friend, his sister. It was not their only bond ;

they liked and understood each other with little converse. Claire, taking Henrietta's arm so as to ensure her not lingering to bewilder or shock Pauline, led the way to the train, and Lucy strode beside them.

"Mother heard from Hilary yesterday," said Claire.

"Is she coming home?"

"She says in the spring."

"How long has she been in Russia?" Lucy asked.

"About a year now."

"It will be sport when she comes back," said Henrietta.

"I'm sure I shall hate her."

"Yes, you and she will rather agree in your idea of sport," Claire answered, as they settled themselves in an empty carriage. "Now moderate your conversation; here are the others."

"No one else must be allowed in," was Pauline's decision. "Lucy, you'd better occupy one seat, and we'll fill up the other."

Henrietta, however, tossing her hat on the rack, seated herself beside her brother, opposite to the Norrises and Clement. Her hair was now revealed; *cendré*, smooth, cut *à l'enfant d'Edouard*, the fringe hiding her eyebrows. Her face was unsymmetrical, owing, Claire said, to the frequency with which her tongue sought her cheek; and this gave her a rather sardonic expression, which was not altogether misleading; she shared with Lucy a profound unaffected cynicism, a highly developed sense of humour, intellectual snobbery, and intolerance for the stupid, the sentimental, the ignoble and the insincere. She looked foreign, especially when her mood, or the light darkened her eyes, thus accentuating her pallor; for only rarely, when she was excited, did spots of pink appear at the apex of the triangular shadow which gave her cheeks a hollow, strange, disquieting look.

Lucy, too, had pale hollow cheeks. His face was meditative, narrow, large-boned. Only the mouth was small and fine; the lips scarcely moved when he spoke. He was, like many men of twenty-nine, a little bald and

stooping. He lay back in his corner, and taking off his glasses began to rub his eyes.

"How's Russell?" Claire asked.

"He's got jaundice. You know they're at Ypres now," said Henrietta. "Isn't it bl— beastly. Damn this blasted war."

Claire noticed suddenly, and with a rush of pity, that her friend had been crying.

"Jaundice on the top of everything else! Mud and blood and ice and lice—" Russell's sister continued.

"And now jaundice," Pauline put in. She had a slightly possessive attitude about Russell Lincoln—although she did not requite his passion for her—and this was reflected in her manner.

Henrietta looked critically at her, and went on with deliberation: "And all the time these old fire-eaters in clubs—" a passing train drowned her words, and when it had passed Clement was addressing her tentatively:

"All this outcry about old men—is there anything in it? They mind just as much as we do."

"Perhaps they do. But they've had their good time."

"We shall have ours," said Claire.

"The younger ones of us will. The war's just dished *us*. And anyway, the future will be rotten. By the time these idiots have done being patriotic about England they'll have made it unfit to live in. Think of all the boys who'll be brought up to despise girls, and think they're G.A. . . . Just what we're getting over. And they'll wish they'd been grown up in time to be in the war."

"Their fathers will have been in it," Clement pointed out.

"The children will only hear about V.C.s and 'Fifty Gallant Deeds for Boys' and 'With Haig in High Wood.'"

"I think it will be better in many ways," said Claire. "People have had to make sacrifices——"

"When they haven't made fortunes, and—Oh, Claire, how *can* you talk about sacrifices? It isn't good for people to sacrifice themselves; and anyway, the loss most people really mind badly is money."

"Oh come!" protested Clement, his sanity, his conventions and his ideals all outraged by what, Claire could tell from his tone, he regarded as a silly exaggeration.

"I'm like that myself," said Henrietta unperturbed. "Except when I choose to remember and realise the horrors, or except when they're brought home to me, all I mind is having less cash and no young men and hardly any dances and no servant. If only I could remember the war, I'd be less ashamed. And I know I'm not specially callous."

"That's what I meant yesterday morning," Claire said to Clement.

"Yes, Claire, you know what I mean, don't you? And we aren't morbid."

"I'm not so sure," Clement broke in quickly. "I don't want you to be callous, but . . ."

"At least they needn't *enjoy* the war," Henrietta interrupted bitterly with a gesture.

"Nobody does," said Clement.

"My good man! Have you been living in Hawaii?" She paused and Claire supported her:

"I know what she means; there is rather a—too much courage on the part of people who are safely over age—women too." All the same, she thought, Henrietta was being rather violent and crude; there was of course a connection between this and her morning's tears, the tears of which only an intimate friend could perceive the traces. It was a pity that Clement's first real meeting with Henrietta should coincide with an abnormal mood in her. Claire longed for them to like each other. She had that desire to draw her friends together which turns irresponsible people into match-makers. She felt thus also in regard to her family. She never admired Pauline in a becoming mood, or dress, without wishing their parents to admire her too; and it was a constant, though small, source of dissatisfaction to her that Pauline always appeared quite indifferent to their mother's peculiar grace and charm. She hoped, however, that

when Clement and Henrietta saw more of each other they would discover each other's extreme lovable-ness.

The party emerged, soon after eleven, on to the shadowed valley station of Box Hill. Sunday calm lay over the village; the church bells had ceased to ring. They began at once to climb, and soon left the road for a track, slippery and chalky, but leading them up towards the sunlight.

"With eyes glued to the spoor they trekked the trail," said Henrietta. "In case you ever want to write your African experiences, Poppy—I mean, Pauline, I point out that those three words can be used interchangeably, without spoiling the perfectly good local colour. That reminds me, Claire, do you advise me to buy a hay-box?"

"What's that?" her brother asked with a trace of anxiety.

"My dear Lucy! Do you tell me you've never yet struck a hay-box in all your legal career? They're marvellous objects—a sort of cross between a dewpond and a thermos flask. You boil a pudding and put it in all amongst the hay, and then something scientific happens. It goes on boiling, or something. The only doubt seems to be, if you have to boil it first—why? . . . as Claire would say."

They came to the top of the hill, some of them panting furtively, and going to an edge where the ground fell steeply, looked across a rich leaf-stained valley of curves and slopes, drenched in sunshine, misty in the hollows.

"Surrey is lovely," said Claire, "whatever people may say about suburbia."

"Sophisticated," said Lucy, but without scorn.

"Surrey is hot——" said Henrietta, "but Surrey is not as hot as curry. Custard is yellow, but custard is not as yellow as mustard. Motors are smelly, but motors are not as smelly as bloaters. Anyone can do it, only they don't."

"It's just as well," Claire replied, taking Henrietta's arm, "it prevents ill-feeling."

"Any more?" Pauline asked.

"Oh yes; trees are green, but trees are not as green as peas."

"I see you don't worry about truth," said Clement.

"Oh no! Down with realism! Grapes are—no, that's indecent."

"Just in time," Pauline remarked, with a supercilious smile, and making a movement away from the edge of the plateau. "Let's go on."

"Have you the map, Lucy?" said Henrietta. "Have you made out the least likely route? Have you marked the short cuts, rights-of-way and what not? In other words, how far is this blighted pub?"

Without replying, her brother struck the pocket of his coat with his large, pale, long-fingered hand, and led them towards a lane.

"I knew it. We're in for a good five-mile detour. Inevitable footpaths! I know their little game; they lead you round and round in a triangle, and meanwhile I can smell that pub receding into the distance. Oh dear, here's a stile. My blue knickers went mottled in the wash. Don't look, Pauline, or you'll get a shock."

Lucy let out one monosyllabic guffaw, and Pauline answered, "Well, I won't," as though humouring a child. Claire felt her sister's patronage and condescension and aloofness, but without resentment. She fell back to walk with Henrietta, who presently asked her if Pauline was engaged to be married.

"Good Lord, no—why?"

"She's coming the married lady over me to-day, isn't she rather? Oh, I don't mind at all. But Claire, Clement doesn't like me."

"It'll take him a little while to get used to you, naturally."

"Yes, I suppose so. But I hope he will. I like him, he is a dear."

A few days before, Claire would have answered spontaneously without *arrière pensée*, "Yes, he's a darling." But she could not mislead her friend by the half-truth of a facile agreement, and so she made no reply.

When they came up with the others, there was a general pause at a gate, and some one proposed that they should eat their sandwiches, and drink at the inn when they found it. The three girls perched, and Lucy leaned his back and elbows, on the gate. Clement, a yard or two farther off, sat on a fence surveying them in profile. Quiet and sunshine lay all around; on one hand were the enclosed fields they had left, on the other, an open heathery stretch, with tiny paths winding among the gorse bushes.

Clement swept the view with his eyes, and then brought them to rest on Pauline, with unconscious satisfaction. His unformulated taste in feminine beauty was conventional; and Henrietta's appearance, for which there were few precedents, worried him without him knowing it, as a tiny wrinkle in the bedclothes disturbs a sleeper. The contrast between the two girls was striking; but he was not aware of being struck by it; he only felt a deepening of his contentment as his eyes rested on Pauline Norris, who gave him, over Lucy's dream-wrapped head, an amiable smile. Beyond her, Miss Lincoln was unusually quiet in the mesmeric height of noon; his glance slipped over her to Claire, who smoked, still and watchful and beautifully familiar to him; and back to Lucy Lincoln, where it stayed. "Queer chap," he thought.

Lucy's chin was buried deep in his hands, which stood up each side of his face like shutters; between them protruded his large nose, with pince-nez on it, and an old pipe, depending from his lips; all these were overshadowed by his ancient hat. He appeared to ponder deeply, but on the other hand—like the Sphinx—he might have been asleep. He was the only one who did not stir when the faint church bell sounded. "Holy Communion," said Claire, coming to the ground.

"Adders abound," replied Henrietta with characteristic irrelevance.

"That reminds me," said Clement, as they went on, "Mollie Cox has gone into a convent."

"Really!" Pauline's tone was civil, but Claire's interest was genuinely aroused; she wanted to know why. Mollie Cox was the well-educated daughter of a publican near Sparrows, to whom she had had the satisfaction of lending books.

"Wasn't she the pretty girl?" Pauline asked.

"Vi Farlow's friend," the young man answered. "It's a convent near Wantage."

"Anglican or Catholic? And *why*, Clement?" Claire questioned.

"Anglican. I don't know why. Vi won't talk about it."

"They used to be such friends. Perhaps they split over religion."

"I can't satisfy your inquisitiveness, so it's no good."

"A village drama," Henrietta put in:

"There was an old monk of Siberia
Whose life it grew drearier and drearier;
With the hell of a yell, he escaped from his cell,
And went off with a Mother Superior."

The rhyme was not new, yet Lucy let out another of his unexpected guffaws; every one looked at him.

"How's it done, Lucy?" Pauline asked, with an assumption of gaiety inadequately disguising her condescension.

"It's not done to laugh at one's own family's jokes, I know," his sister answered for him, "you must excuse us Lincolns, Pauline; we don't know how to behave."

Clement thought that Pauline must hate Henrietta, but she only laughed. Claire's silent comment was that both were to blame for their betrayal of hostility. Pauline oughtn't to have come if she was going to be superior; and Henrietta ought to have the tact to ignore her superiority.

Henrietta had, at least, however, the tact to bring about a readjustment of partners for which Claire herself had been unwilling to manœuvre; when they left the inn after a brief rest for drinks she drew Pauline on in front with her brother; and thus Claire had her wish, which was to walk with Clement in the frail, bright wintry beauty of the afternoon, whose very perfection suggested transience.

"The Lincolns are clever," said Clement, who never disguised his rarely-felt desire to discuss personalities as do those who are so preoccupied with them that they feel it necessary to feign indifference. His remark was half a question; and Claire confirmed him.

"These two are. Russell isn't, though he's awfully nice. Lucy's very good at his job."

"What's that?"

"Solicitor. And Henrietta's as clever as they're made."

"He seems a nice chap," Clement remarked, skirting a possibly unpleasant topic.

"Yes, he's a dear. Frightfully shy and reserved and critical. He's not a bit interested in people—I don't think men can be as much as women. Though of course Pauline isn't . . ."

"Haven't they any parents?"

"No mother. She was French. Their names are really French: Henriette and Lucien."

"Oh, I see. Hence Lucy."

"Yes. Their father's somewhere—'Oh no, we never mention him.' He's a bad lot. Of course, he might turn up any time. I think both of them are scared of that, at the back of their minds . . . That might account for Henrietta's nerves and restlessness. Lucy's not quite so bad. You feel there's some chance for him——"

"Chance of what?"

"Of happiness. But she grasps at it and wants it so, she's almost bound to lose it; at least that's what I feel. Yet she can't sit down and be calm and hopeful;

much less go into a convent, so to speak. I mean, she's too much interested in life to leave it alone."

"What's wrong with her?"

"Did you ever read *The Shadow of Life*? She's like the hero in that: afraid of life, afraid of emotions, that is—of being hurt. She enjoys the intellectual part awfully. I sometimes think it's lack of real vitality that makes her like that."

"You wouldn't say so to see her."

"Oh that's nothing to go by—high spirits . . . it's something quite separate." Claire lapsed into thought.

"You're awfully fond of her, aren't you?" Clement asked.

"Yes, most awfully." But instantly her thoughts came back from her other friend to the one at her side. She glanced at him with an accustomed sense of intimacy, with a heightened sense of beauty. His serene face under the felt hat gave her a sympathy she had never before felt for sculptors—the stillness, the warm, fine-grained solidity of his countenance infused with life—guarding but not hiding the steady strong flame and pulse of life, suggested the plastic art; she longed to cast bronze to a life-inspired shape of symmetry and candour. Then, with a sudden rush of blood to the finger tips she knew that the desire to manipulate clay or chisel had merged in the desire to touch the rough tweed of his sleeve. A shadow passed across her eyes; for an instant the clear burnished landscape was blotted out by the dark shadow of intense emotion—not the love which stirs the vitals, but that which sits between the eyes above the brow, and which sometimes drops an awful veil across the senses. Even in that instant her tongue was not loosened. Some profounder, or at least more powerful instinct kept her lips closed. When sun-stained heath and faint horizon and bright firmament dropped back again into place, she knew that she had said nothing; and as she looked away from her companion, across the undulations of Surrey, her obscurely imposed restraint seemed to flower in silent visible beauty around her.

Across that short distance between them Henrietta's ironic laughter came suddenly to her ears, and as though even thus vicariously Henrietta could not but be irrelevant with a fine keen edge of appositeness. To her mind leapt one of her friend's phrases: "What a baby-snatch."

Later in the afternoon, they came out of a narrow lane on to the open top of a long slope. Behind them hung an orange sun throwing their long shadows on the damp chalky soil; to the left was an inclined sweep of parchment-coloured plough-land; and at its foot, at right angles to their present path, ran a white high road, bordered on its farther side by a beech hedge still in leaf, startlingly rich-hued in the oblique light, holding their eyes with its astonishing copper glory in the landscape of ivory soil and delicate blue shadows. After an instant's staring, the whole five started to run down the slope, the frosty air rushing past their cheeks and ears, tingling, exhilarating. Then they walked soberly along the high road towards Leatherhead.

Pauline attempted a conversation with Clement. She apparently desired to discuss the Lincolns, but out of loyalty to Claire the young man answered evasively.

"It's odd," she pursued unabashed, and with an unusually confidential tone, "Claire and Henrietta being such friends when they're so alike."

"Are they?"

"Well," said Pauline, with an air of fine candour, "I must admit it was Russell who pointed it out to me—you know, their brother who's in France. Of course, he's not what they call clever, but he was clever enough to see that likeness, and when he pointed it out I saw how true it was."

"Oh," said Clement, with the nice caution of one who does not recognise the landmarks. He was disconcerted without knowing it by Pauline's artificial manner; he did not consciously recognise that she was practising on him the manner and speech of a woman of the world which

she hoped to acquire; but his sincerity apprehended her Thespianism, and he felt uneasy. Nevertheless, he derived pleasure from her talk, the charm of her urbanity was not lost on him, and it was the instinct of the prompter which made him add, "Like in what way?"

"Oh, you know their weird opinions—socialism, and all that."

This was rather a poor climax; and to Clement the explanation was unconvincing. "If they *are* alike," he said, "I think it must go deeper than that."

His companion was not prepared to follow it there; for, with a return to her normal tone, she dismissed the matter with a vaguely ill-natured remark about not attempting to fathom Henrietta's depths.

The party went down the steep street of the town, a street all hazed and flushed with the pinkish-gold of the sunset. The little common shops, Sabbath-shuttered, the low windows filled with aspidistras between falls of Nottingham lace, were set in house-fronts of radiant brick. There were only a few loiterers in the sharp air.

"There is a flower-shop in Devonshire Street that sells aspidistra plant food," said Henrietta. "How I hate curtains. Of course they're nice in winter to shut out the dreary half-light and the rain."

"I like the long, straight lines they make," said Claire, "it hides those hard edges."

"Hear, hear," Lucy agreed.

"Well, as long as it's only one layer I can bear it," his sister replied, "a skirt so to speak. What I bar are windows with a skirt and a petticoat and sometimes a little chemise draped right across too. Is it done because bow-windows have bow legs?"

CHAPTER VI

THE RENT IN THE CURTAINS

THE dance which had been planned to take place in Bill Osler's studio ended by being held in the Norrises' house, and some time later than the date originally fixed.

Clement had joined the army soon after the Sunday walk ; and his departure left Claire so listless that she had no wish for any gaieties. Pauline went to too many dances of other people's to be in a great hurry to organise one of her own, and then Bill Osler himself got mumps. He was in the Artists Rifles, stationed in London, and therefore was easily accessible ; so when his recovery coincided with Clement's obtaining a commission Claire decided to celebrate the event—providing Clement could get leave—by giving a dance in Westminster, and inviting Bill's co-operation.

The front drawing-room, so rarely used, was brilliantly lit. Cascades of glittering crystal drops fell from the chandeliers. The parquet floor, flawless, smooth, polished, beautiful, stretched temptingly from fire place to far wall, from the three long windows hung with green to the white open folding doors, through which the piano had been pushed into the back drawing-room. On the green walls white-friezed, the pictures hung top-heavily, lacking (to the eye) the accustomed support of heavy furniture.

At ten o'clock the room was empty except for a neat, tallish, red-haired young man in khaki, who stood with his back to the room, examining a frame full of silhouettes. He passed then to the adjacent picture, which he studied with the same apparently deep attention ; and so to a

large anæmic pastel group of three pallid little girls, whom, after backing to get a more comprehensive view, he recognised by the conformation of their brows as Claire and Pauline Norris. The sitting one was presumably Hilary. This production did not detain him long. He was absorbed in a tier of three small obscure melodramatic oil landscapes when Pauline, dressed in deep rose-pink, came in from the passage.

"Sorry I was so long," she said. "I suppose every one else is feeding." They moved towards the stairs.

"Yes, even the pianist and the youth with the game leg."

"Which is he?"

"The violinist."

"Has he a game leg? How did you know?"

"I saw."

"Really, Bill!" the girl exclaimed in half-scornful amusement, "the things you notice!" They entered the dining-room, which was filled with guests standing, eating and drinking.

"What has he been noticing now?" asked Claire, who was with Clement near the door.

"Oh, Claire," said Bill seriously, "there you are. I wanted to ask you something. Do you recollect that silk smock?"

"Which? We were dressed in an unending series of silk smocks."

"The one in the pastel group I mean, of course."

"Yes, I do, why?"

"Oh, I just wondered," Bill answered, carelessly. "You look so pleased with it in the portrait. I knew the meaning of that self-consciously protruded stomach."

"Blue, green and pink," said Pauline.

"So I saw. Was it always the same allocation—good word, what?"

"Yes, but what does it mean? Did we always have the same colour? Yes. Hilary green because of her hair; Claire pink because she was dark; me blue because of my eyes."

"And very nice too. And of course the artist connived."

"I don't know *what* you mean, Bill," Pauline protested. "It's all very well to talk to Claire and Henrietta like that, but I'm not intellectual."

"Connived at the myth."

"Yes," Claire answered. "Of course he was heavily paid to do so."

It was Bill Osler's firmly expressed conviction that Hilary was a figment of the Norrises' imagination; that she didn't exist, and never had existed; that they had invented her for some excellent private reason, as Ernest invented Bunbury. Bill had only known the Norrises since their advent to London, so there was no corroborative evidence of the existence of their adopted sister; but, he often said, even had tidings come from Leicester that Hilary was remembered, he would not believe in her; a colossal hoax had doubtless been practised on the inhabitants of that town.

Presently there was a movement towards the ball-room, and Claire instructed the musicians to strike up. She and Bill danced in silence, moving with absorption among the chattering couples. Some man began to sing, and half a dozen voices joined in:

"Dancing Teacher, show us how to do the *Fox Trot*
(You'll have to watch your step.)"

but neither Bill nor Claire opened their closed lips. They danced with the grimness of those to whom dancing is an intellectual passion. They slid skilfully on the last three notes of the tune, and came to a stop near the door. Standing aside to let the rest pass out, they waited, and when the last of the twenty couples had gone by to sit out on the stairs or in the back drawing-room, went across to one of the windows, which Claire opened a little. Then their tongues were suddenly loosed. They talked with ease and fluency and mutual comprehension. Their converse was unlike their dancing,

except that they never took each other by surprise. They clashed little sparks from each other's wits with absurd gravity ; there was no real strife between them, no obscure, baffled or doubtful feelings ; their relationship was clear, like a bright small crackling fire of wood.

Bill Osler's gravity, like his extreme neatness and uprightness, was part of his Anglo-Saxon pose. He liked to be so ordinary as not to be noticed. He carefully cultivated an appearance and manner of extreme conventionality ; his chief anxiety was that of his Irish-Cornish nationality being discovered, or even suspected. He had once been heard earnestly begging Henrietta to describe him to her friends as a young man with a heart of gold. " Or a goose with golden eggs ? " Henrietta had retorted. Henrietta said that he disguised his Celtic fringe with curling-papers, and the jibe was two-edged, because the close cropping of his red hair was intended not only to prevent any danger of shagginess, but also to thwart its tendency to curl. He was, fortunately for his pose, slender, but compact, extremely close-knit, having a figure that was almost military, even before it was covered with a khaki uniform. His small head high-set, was well-covered with flesh, yet lean. His hazel eyes had often with strangers a side-long glance, and he sometimes blushed ; not from shyness, but from that lesser curse of civilised man, self-consciousness : he blushed if he thought he had said anything that might conceivably be thought Irish, Celtic, poetic, mystic or sentimental. His conception of an Anglo-Saxon rôle included observation of material facts, suspiciousness of everything not known at first hand, and the use of the word " what " at the end of sentences. He spoke always in an even, almost monotonous voice, with Anglo-Saxon calm. He had rehearsed and played the rôle so many countless times that he was by now identified with it ; that is to say, he very rarely had cause to blush.

What lay beneath this insincerity, if insincerity it was, Claire did not know ; Henrietta's recommendation, and

the fact that he was extremely easy to get on with, made her always ready to see him ; in addition, she admired his paintings. They were of fantastic subjects, minutely executed in fine and brilliant water colours, having much the same effect as the capital pictures in illuminated manuscripts, but without their gilding.

"Don't get cold," he said, as she lingered near the window.

"How queer empty lighted rooms are," said Claire, "they're rather like the feeling of having seen it before. . . . What is it ?"

They moved to the hearth, where a small fire glowed, and the girl turned her back to it, and continued to survey the gleaming length of the room.

"I should be frightened to be up here alone after you'd all gone. It's far worse than the dark. It's positively sinister—and yet full, it's so gay."

"Ah, the reverse of the medal, what ? But about remembering things—you know—that haven't happened, don't you think that's rather a dear old theory about there being no time and all that ?"

"I'd never heard of it. What is it ?"

By the time Henrietta entered, an argument was well under way. Claire smiled with pleasure, watching her friend come across the polished golden-brown floor in her stiff, full dress of pale green brocaded with silver. "My partner's fallen in love with Pauline ; I can't get him to look at me, so I left him," she said, kneeling down by the fire. "Go on."

"Well, as you say so, I will," Bill answered. "Now then, Claire, listen to me : if there *is* time, then time began ; and if time had a beginning what was there before ?"

"I don't see any snag in that," said Claire. "You say there's only eternity—well, couldn't there be eternity, before and after time ? A sort of circle of string with a knot in it ?"

Bill was unable for the moment to recollect the right

answer to this poser ; so he hastened to point out one obvious advantage in his theory. " You see, the satisfactory thing about this notion is that it explains second sight and premonitions—oh, right away. You see, if there's no succession of events, if it's all, so to speak, simultaneous, there's no such thing as past and future."

" Yes, only the cure seems worse than the disease," Henrietta put in.

" I can't grasp this simultaneous touch," Claire objected. " After all, things seem to us to happen one after the other, and why should it be . . . an illusion ? "

" We have an illusion of sequence because we can't grasp more than one set of things at a time. But I can't explain it ; I don't know the jargon. Wonderful help, jargon ! You ought to read Bertrand Russell, Claire. He has a nice thing called ' the frozen country '—a very pleasant notion. You'd like that. I expect Henrietta can lend him to you. And then there's Determinism. Henrietta can tell you all about that. She got it all from me originally—believe me, I'm some nut on philosophy !—but now she reels it off as if it was her own invention."

" Yes," said Henrietta.

" There was a young man who said ' Damn ! '
It annoys me to think that I am
Predestined to move in a permanent groove,
I'm not even a bus ; I'm a tram."

" Your aptness is absolutely staggering," protested the young man. " Claire, this is your house, may I go and get a drink ? You ladies, as they say, don't seem to need a drop except once in a blue-moon."

" Oh, do go, Bill : I'm so sorry I didn't ask you. For Heaven's sake go and drink as much as you can."

" Oh, before I go, just tell me, will you, who the staff chap is ? "

" Oh, that's Ivor Webb."

" Pauline's latest," said Henrietta.

" Yes," Claire agreed.

"And very nice too, what? Don't forget you have the next with me," he added to Henrietta, as he departed.

"Dear old Bill," she said, after a moment. "I hope this blasted war will be over before he has to go out."

The words were scarcely out of her mouth before the young man reappeared on the threshold of the room. He was changed. He made a sign which each girl assumed to be addressed to the other. The violinist in the adjoining room began to tune up.

It seemed a long time to Bill before Henrietta realised it was she to whom he had beckoned. He found it impossible to speak. The gleaming floor stretched between him and the hearth like a vast plain. Upon its other border, in what seemed unnaturally prolonged stillness, stood Claire, pale and small and black-haired, in a cloud of misty blue; and Henrietta, kneeling in her stiff green dress, which suggested a Renaissance conception of Spring. At last she moved towards him; he noticed the triangular flushed shadows on her either cheek which showed that she was exhilarated.

Claire, left alone, thought that as she was not booked for the next dance she would go and see how her parents were getting on. Her father, had dined at the club but he had probably by now returned. Mrs. Norris decked out as Claire loved to see her, and mildly glowing with pride and pleasure in her daughters and her guests, had wandered from room to room apparently quite happy to be just an onlooker. She would, however, be pleased if Claire sought her company.

It was only by a perpetual effort that Claire prevented herself following Clement, if only with her eyes. She wanted more than anything to dance with him, to stand near him, or at least to look at him. But pride, and her high resolve, kept even her eyes conventionally changeable in their direction. If, however, in seeking her parents, she found him, there could be no harm. His smiling welcome and frank pleasure in her company

would be a double gift—a flower and a sword. To hug one was to hug both ; his eyes were so candid and virginal in their friendly homage, and his smile so unequivocal. But as she moved forward from her place, Bill reappeared, quickly crossing the room, and said with less composure than usual :

“ It was Lincoln. He came to see Henrietta. I’m afraid it’s bad news.”

“ Oh, Bill ! ” Claire exclaimed under her breath, with a contraction of the heart. The bright curtains slung across the gulf seemed suddenly to be rent like the veil of the Temple, and the dark apertures yawned beyond. After an instant of utter motionlessness she almost ran out into the passage, and as she began to descend the stairs the music struck up. She was forced to wait until everyone, including her mother, had passed her.

“ Mr. Lincoln seems to be in the hall,” Mrs. Norris murmured, “ but I haven’t spoken to him.”

“ That’s all right, darling, I will.” She blessed her mother’s incomprehensible tact, and ran down.

In the lit hall, by his sister’s side, Lucy was standing in his ancient fur-lined overcoat, holding his old felt hat, staring at the floor ; his chin sunk, his lower lip stuck out. As Claire approached, he tried to speak, stopped to clear his throat, and then brought out, in his usual rather precise way : “ It’s Russell ” ; but there was a pale ring round his mouth.

Henrietta handed her the telegram, repeating calmly, “ It’s Russell.”

Claire accepted the paper dumbly, but she did not read it. She took one of her friend’s hands, which was very cold, and looked anxiously at her face, which was frozen-calm.

“ Well——” said Lucy, uncertainly, making an abortive movement. Then he slapped his pocket and his eyebrows twitched above his glasses. “ I suppose there’s no use staying here.”

“ No,” his sister agreed, and began at once to tremble

violently. Her teeth knocked together as she added :
“ I’ll go up and get my things.”

“ Shall I come home with you ? ” asked Claire, with a feeling of abysmal uselessness.

“ No. I shall be all right in a minute. Oh, Claire ! ” She turned into Claire’s arms, but no tears came : only the ague increased. Lucy stared at the front door.

“ I’ll fetch your things. Sit there, my darling,” said Claire, leading her to a seat, and kissing her, “ I shan’t be a minute.”

She glanced back as she ran upstairs, and saw that her friend was leaning back against the wall with her eyes closed ; Lucy still stood with averted face ; they appeared unconscious of each other. And yet, she knew, a profound sympathy and affection existed between them ; more profound than their feelings for their brother, of whose death the telegram had brought news. She had time to be glad that this was a lesser tragedy than many ; and yet, knowing how deep was Henrietta’s capacity for suffering, and thinking Lucy’s to be equal, she felt a huge resentment against death : a pity at once vast and acute for the sensitive, proud, vulnerable pair.

She snatched up the cloak and shoes from Pauline’s bed. In this room, she, her sister and Henrietta had lolled and talked yesterday afternoon, tired out with polishing the floor and directing the moving of furniture ; and all the time Russell had been lying dead in a field in France ; and in other fields, a thousand other brothers, English and German, Austrian and French, Russian and Italian. . . . Horrible . . . Nightmarish . . . Incredible . . .

In a twinkling she was back on the ground floor. Henrietta got up, still shaking, and put on her coat. Claire knelt and took off her friend’s green shoes which Lucy put in his pocket. She went to the dining-room door and told one of the maids behind the buffet to get a taxi. The maid came out into the dreadful silence—a silence on which the sound and rhythm of the syncopated

dance tune and the shuffle of feet upstairs, beat in vain, as on a closed door. It was as though a crystal coffin enclosed them.

"I'll come round early to-morrow," said Claire. Henrietta nodded, clenching her teeth to prevent their chattering. Claire laid a hand on Lucy's arm, and murmured "Good night." Then, realising that she was still somehow grasping the telegram she offered it to him. Exclaiming "Bloody!" with suppressed but extreme violence, he thrust it in his pocket.

They all lingered miserably for a long time until the taxi came. Claire took her friend's arm, and as they went down the steps in the cold night air, she became aware that Henrietta was crying. At the last, Lucy put his head out of the cab-window, and said: "Thanks awfully, Claire," and she paused, judging by his tone he was disposed to add something. However, he merely said, "Right!" to the driver, and sank back into the murky interior.

She went slowly upstairs, conscious of little but exhaustion. Another interval was in progress, and she had to pass two couples sitting on the staircase and to exchange suitable remarks. Bill was standing by himself half-way up the flight to her mother's room. They looked at each other, and she shrugged her shoulders; the young man frowned deeply. She went on past him, past the second floor to the third, and entered Pauline's room.

Pauline was arranging her dress before the glass, but she turned quickly and said: "What's up? Is Henrietta seedy? Bill is being so very serious."

"Russell is dead," Claire answered. "He's been killed."

Pauline was astounded. Her mind was unable to conceive that tragedy was even remotely connected with her; it was as though some one had introduced a notorious criminal as her long-lost brother. "*Russell?*" she echoed, incredulously. "Why, good Lord! . . ." and then, as though questioning the truth of a rumour, "When did they hear?"

"I don't know. To-night. Lucy came to tell Henrietta."

"Didn't they say which day he——?"

Claire sat down suddenly on the edge of the white bed, and answered: "Does it matter?"

"Good heavens!" her sister murmured to herself, looking amazedly about, and, as she assimilated the news, paled slowly. "How perfectly horrible! . . . Claire! . . . Isn't it too dreadful?"

The other dragged herself wearily to her feet; the party had to go on. She wondered if Clement had noticed her absence from the room. She had danced with him four times at the beginning of the evening, and was engaged to him for four more consecutive dances, which must be almost due.

"Do any of them know?" asked Pauline.

"Bill does." Claire opened the door, but her sister's peremptory inarticulate exclamation stopped her. "Well," she asked shortly.

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm not going to do anything." Then, with a sudden loss of her weary irritation, she closed the door, and coming back, said, "Do you mind dreadfully, Pauly? Were you awfully fond of him?"

It was Pauline who now sank on to the bed, and at this question she dropped her eyes to the floor with an evasive expression which her family had christened her "fib-face." Perceiving this, Claire experienced a sudden passionate unwillingness to be the recipient of a lie, however white, however appropriate and decorous, and she added impulsively: "Don't talk about it if you'd rather not, my dear; only I'm sorry I was cross just now." In the pause that followed she was conscious of relief that Pauline had not retorted, "But I *want* to talk about it." Instead, she had risen, gone over to the dressing-table, and from there answered with an unfamiliar tone of shyness.

"Well, no; to be honest, I wasn't fearfully devoted

to him. *Poor* Russell. But still, it does make me feel pretty rotten. He was so keen on things, and on the things he meant to do. What books call the 'life of the party.' It's dreadful to think of him as——"

"Damnable."

"And then, he was rather keen on me, you know, and that makes me feel sort of responsible. You know what I mean, Claire?"

"Of course it does; I know."

There was a silence; then Pauline said: "Well, I suppose we must go down."

"Not till you want to. Don't hurry. It's much better to face it at once."

"Yes, I suppose it is. But I don't see how you know."

"Everybody knows things like that. It's better to take hold of it hard, and realise the worst part."

"What is the worst part?" Pauline came over to her sister, and together they stood near the door. She seemed completely trustful of her elder's wisdom; completely serious and sincere.

"It is, I suppose," said Claire slowly, thinking with concentration of Henrietta, "that you will never see him again."

CHAPTER VII

GIFTS

CLAIRE told Clement that night that she was going to breakfast punctually so as to arrive early at the Lincolns' flat. He said he would do the same, and walk part of the way with her, thereby making the most of his last days of leave. He was due back in camp in the evening.

It was a very cold January morning, with a slate-grey sky that threatened snow. Claire in her black fur coat, Clement in his British warm, started off across the almost deserted park at half-past nine. Claire was tired and without emotion. She was glad, always glad to be with Clement, and she knew that anything she wished to say could better be said to him than to any other, but her mind was benumbed, her heart empty. Warmth and light, sorrow and pleasure, would come flooding back to them; but it would be after he had left her. And soon he too would be in direst danger of a fate like Russell Lincoln's. She shivered against the cold wind. There seemed at present only slate-grey lifelessness and helpless fear.

They did not talk much, and in Piccadilly, parted, to meet again at lunch.

Claire found Henrietta in the small kitchen, washing up the breakfast dishes, and, discarding her coat, she took a cloth and began to dry the cups and plates.

"How late did you dance?"

"One o'clock."

"When does Clement go back?"

"This evening."

"Oh, Claire, what a shame! You ought to have the whole of to-day with him."

"My dear child, there's the whole afternoon. Besides,

I wanted to come." Presently she said: "Do you remember that Sunday when we went for a walk? I thought that morning you'd been crying. Was it about Russell?"

"No. Yes—partly. I knew that Ypres Canal was fearfully dangerous; and then I knew Clement would be joining up soon, and that you'd be dismal; and then Bill was in it too. Everything seemed too beastly."

"How did you sleep?" Claire asked; but she was wondering, not for the first time, whether Bill and Henrietta did not care more for each other than either admitted.

"Very well. I slept till nine. We've only just finished breakfast, as a matter of fact. Lucy's gone to the office, but he's going to come home after lunch. I suppose we shall have to try and discover where father is so as to let him know."

"Do you think he's in England?"

"No, I don't. He'd have turned up if he had been. When Lucy and I used to talk anxiously about his possible appearance, Russell always said he 'could make rings round father.' Oh, Claire, you know, I wasn't particularly wrapped up in Russell; I'd mind far more if it was Lucy. But oh, Claire, it is dreadful. I can't believe he's dead. I can't believe he doesn't exist any more. I'm sure people don't go on living afterwards; I don't want to think that they do; they wouldn't be them without their bodies. But isn't it too horrible to bear?—that, however much I loved him and longed and longed to see him, I couldn't—not if he'd been everything in the world to me. . . . We've had a letter. . . . They say he died at once. . . . If only it wasn't multiplied so, I could bear it; but it's happening everywhere. All the poor Germans—the poor wives: that's what I can't bear. Standing up and killing each other. They're all mad, as they consent to it; they *must* all be mad, except you and me and a few others. How could they all consent if they were sane? It isn't sanity. It's a nightmare. I can't believe it's going on."

She had laid down the plate she was washing, and stood, holding her wet hands away from her skirt, so that they dripped only on to the floor; she stood, palely staring at Claire, who went on drying the cleansed crockery as she answered: "I know. I was thinking as I got your coat last night that there were thousands like you, and much, much worse. But don't you see, Henrietta, it's not the same for people who believe it's right as it is for us? They think their relations have died for liberty. You know, if you saw a man beating a child you'd attack him. You might even kill him; well, it's like that."

"But the poor soldiers themselves," the other girl went on, unheeding, pouring out her accumulated thoughts, "in agony and mutilated and blind, and their nerves gone! You know some of the wounded ones can't sleep, and scream in air-raids. It can't be worth it, to do that for patriotism. Besides, who knows it is for liberty? I'd rather be German, than be separated from the people I love. It's like death to be separated."

Claire's thought flew to Clement; and immediately came back to her despairing friend.

"Yes," she said, for she couldn't disagree, "you know I think the same as you. Only the soldiers think they're fighting for liberty, too—it's not only the people at home who believe it. After all, most people would far rather be English, and they think if they don't fight, England will cease to exist . . . And oh, my dear," she went on, taking Henrietta's cold, wet hands, "we must simply set our teeth and stick it; because *they* have to. Everything is just as bad and worse for them. Perhaps they adore being alive, and have to die. Or perhaps they leave jobs they love, so as to join the army. So we must bear it too." She deliberately did not refer to what Henrietta had said was "like death." "The jobs they loved" was a euphemism; and speaking so, she thought first of Bill—because she was feeling for and through her friend—and only secondly of Clement. Holding

Henrietta's hands tightly, she went on. "I know it isn't for me to jaw, because I'm not hurt, but you know, darling, I feel it too, because of you. And because of poor Lucy."

The reference to her brother affected Henrietta suddenly; she dragged away her hands, and putting them to her face, turned to the wall. Presently she dried her eyes and said more calmly: "After all, I'm very lucky. Thank God in Heaven Lucy is so delicate."

"Oh, I say, I forgot to tell you, Henrietta, that Bill said he was coming round between six and nine, if he could get away."

Henrietta's face showed a faint reflection of pleasure. "Well, I hope I shall have recovered my normal appearance by then," she replied, with an echo of her usual tartness.

"Don't be silly," said Claire, "you know Bill doesn't mind what sort of an old guy you look like."

"I dare say not; but I do. And if he doesn't, he ought to. I say, Claire, tell me——" she paused; and from her tone, despite the form of words, her friend could not judge whether a confidence, or a demand for a confidence, would follow.

"Well, what is it?"

"Are you—have you ever——?"

The two girls looked deeply and silently into each other's eyes.

"Yes," said Claire; and as Henrietta's cold violence had thawed a few moments ago, her own grey numbness melted at this avowal, and tears sprang to her eyes. Without further conversation, they kissed each other, and together finished the house-work.

When Claire got back to the house in Westminster it was noon. She heard loud conversation in the back drawing-room and recognised the voice of Ivor Webb whose labours at the War Office seemed, she reflected, to leave him plenty of time for philandering. Captain Webb's presence was not sufficient, however, to account

for such a commotion, and when she entered, greeted by cries, she perceived two puppies sprawling and prancing on the floor, a tiny brindled bull-dog, and a ball of grey fluff with a disproportionately large head. Pauline on her knees exclaimed :

“ The bull is for me, Claire ; and the chow for you. Aren’t they too adorable ? ”

Claire stood silent by the door. At last she said :
“ Where did they come from ? ”

“ I got them in Bond Street,” said Clement, “ there was a shop window full of dogs and cats, and these two were there.”

“ I know—pink cubicles,” said Pauline.

“ That’s it.”

“ Oh thank you, Clement,” was all that Claire could bring out. She glanced round with an instinct of flight, and saw Ivor Webb’s small, cold, yet expressive eyes attentively watching her. Pauline rose with the brindled pup in her arms. The chow pranced after her, biting at her skirt. “ Hi,” she cried, “ stop it, you little devil ! ”

“ You can’t call him Hi,” objected Ivor Webb, “ unless it’s short for Hi Lung Chang.”

“ Thomas,” said Pauline. “ Thomas is Clement’s second name—did you know, Claire ? ”

“ It seems rather apostolic,” Captain Webb remarked.

“ Ought Chow to be apostolic, too ? ” Clement asked, and Pauline began repeating the names of the Twelve under her breath.

“ What about Baroubadoura, Princess of China ? ” Ivor suggested.

“ But she was a lidy ; who was her young man ? ”

“ Caramalzaman—one of them.”

“ Some mouthful.”

“ Well, Claire could always call him Caramel, for short.”

During this colloquy the new owner of the chow stood still and silent, a little behind the others who were grouped round the playing puppies. She felt a stillness and a silence round her, separating her from her companions,

and though their voices smote her ears, though their bodies moved before her, no word of theirs found an echo in her heart; no appeal from them reached the essential her. Clement, bending and smiling towards the floor was removed from her a thousand yards, a thousand years; she saw him begin to raise himself and brush his head in doing so against her sister's arm; a lock of his hair was ruffled when he stood up, and his face flushed a little—perhaps from his recent posture. The discussion concerning suitable names went on.

Mrs. Norris entered in a motoring bonnet with a long mole-coloured veil, in which she looked like an expensive Quaker. "My dears," she cried, "have you got these little dogs on approval?"

"No, mother," her younger daughter answered her, "there's no getting rid of them."

"Oh, Pauline, what a dear little dog. And what kind is this—a Pomeranian?"

"Mother! It's a Chow——"

"A Chinese Mandarin," Ivor supplemented.

"A Chow! I thought they were yellow. Where did they come from?"

"Clement bought them in Bond Street."

"Oh, Clement—as presents for my girls? How kind of you. You must show them to Tom."

Pauline looked a little doubtful.

"You've been out, Claddie?" her mother went on.

"Yes, to see Henrietta."

This brought down a brief silence on the party. Mrs. Norris rose vaguely, and began to undo her coat. "It's nearly lunch time, my dears," she said.

Clement opened the door for her, and as Claire followed her upstairs, the voices of Pauline and the two men broke out again.

"How is the poor child?" Mrs. Norris asked, turning upon the threshold of her room.

"Oh, mother, it's dreadful," Claire answered. "Aren't you glad you only had daughters?"

"I don't know, darling . . . Yes, perhaps . . . But mothers have a lot to be proud of these days, as well as a lot to bear."

Claire had a sudden intuition. "Do you wish one of us was a boy?" she asked.

"No, darling, no. I couldn't bear to lose either of you."

Claire was about to continue her way upstairs when a further idea struck her. "Is it that you wish we were doing something—for the war, I mean? Are you ashamed of us?"

"Oh no, Claddie dear. I know if it was necessary you'd do anything. Don't worry, dear. I like you to do whatever you think best."

Claire went slowly upstairs. There was so much to think over; it would take her many hours of solitude to sort out the ideas she had accumulated this morning; her conversation with Henrietta and its implications; Clement's impulsive purchase and gift; the gay group in the back drawing-room, and the atmosphere and her own dumbness and isolation in the face of it; and then her brief colloquy with Mrs. Norris and the thoughts to which it had immediately given rise. These occupied her most at the moment. What about father, she wondered as she took off her things; does he mind not having a son to "give"? Her thought was tinged with the bitterness which few of her cast of mind could escape in those days of war. She sympathised with her mother's feelings, although she considered them sentimental; but her mother was not a fire-breather. She would probably have been equally proud—though with a vague sensation of embarrassment—had she possessed an English son and a German son fighting on different sides. Her pride and admiration of courage, though not emotions of high quality, were genuine enough to cut across conventions. She had heard her mother utter statements concerning war and the war which on another's tongue Tom Norris would have condemned violently as disloyal, traitorous, pacifist, socialistic and vile, but which, when

uttered mildly and inconsequently by his wife, he appeared to take perfectly for granted. Claire had listened with a sickened heart when he spoke of the sacrifices of his friends who had "given" sons or nephews to the army, but it had not before occurred to her that he might regret having no living donation to make himself. Pondering this frustration of paternity, she began to feel almost sorry for him; perhaps his friends at the club patronised him or even openly commiserated with him on the sex of his offspring. And his girls weren't even in uniform. Pauline he could feel proud of, merely on account of her looks and liveliness; her air of successful all-conquering youth was enough; but what had she, Claire, done to justify her existence in his eyes? Before the war, to be a girl was sufficient reason for idleness, but the war had changed the views of even the most conventional on this subject. And yet, Claire reflected, even in this there was a great deal of sham; for Mr. Norris and his like were satisfied with the merest semblance of doing; a son, gilded and enscarleted, on the staff; a girl, decoratively occupied a few hours a day at nursing, sewing, driving an official car—either was sufficient food for parental vanity; real patriotism, sacrifice or labour might be academically admired by them; but the counterfeit presentment pleased them equally well. Their smug talk and feelings seemed to belong to a different world, a different race from that in which men were really killed, from that to which Russell and Henrietta belonged. Claire felt herself stand between the two—a connecting link, a hovering spirit, neither facilely contented nor yet deeply distraught, dwelling neither in the incredible bleak landscape of reality, nor yet among the padded cushions and pinpricks and decanters of her father's southern, sheltered, cigar-scented arbour; but somewhere between and yet apart, surveying both; testifying to the truth of one, tolerantly despising the other, from the still fastidious fortress of a quiet interior.

CHAPTER VIII

SKELETONS IN THE CUPBOARD

IT was the habit of the Norrises—and in this they had adapted themselves quickly from the provincial to the metropolitan habit—to lead separate existences, joining forces only for meals and on specific occasions. They arranged to do certain things together as formally as though they lived in different houses. Mr. Norris was often away in the Midlands, nursing a constituency ; and even when he was at home his days were much occupied. He usually contrived to spend an hour or two in the back drawing-room each evening, because theoretically he believed in patriarchal conditions, and he had an ill-defined idea that his presence had a salutary effect on the morals of his children ; but even this sacred hour was sometimes allowed to give way before pressing engagements, such as city dinners or committee meetings at which he and his colleagues dealt kindly but firmly with discontented and exacting Belgians. He was interested in various philanthropic organisations, particularly those brought into existence or prominence by the war.

A few days after the dance, when he was away at Leicester, Claire and Mrs. Norris sat alone at breakfast. Pauline was still in bed after a late night.

It was raining, and Claire's interest in life was at low ebb. She had not heard from Clement as she hoped ; he was a bad correspondent ; and writing to him gave her little satisfaction ; the things she must not say loomed so large. She began to wonder how to pass the day—whether it would not be more sensible and comfortable to have work to do. She had not Pauline's insatiable

appetite for society ; she had not, nor wished to have, Pauline's large number of more or less intimate acquaintances. She had, since the autumn, been spending almost all her time with Henrietta ; but Henrietta resembled one side of herself too closely to be a continuously stimulating companion ; she voiced Claire's amusement at ridiculous externals, her revolt, her longing for the Kingdom of Heaven on earth ; but she did not encourage or soothe as Clement's mere presence did. Perhaps, Claire thought, this was merely to say that friendship is no substitute for love. She meant no disloyalty to her friend, there was no decline in admiration or tenderness. But she had to admit that the ideal companionship for her was not to be found in the flat at Bloomsbury.

Lucy the silent, sunk in the armour-like inertia of the sensitive and the overworked, Henrietta the mocker, at war with existence—they had her great affection, her trust, her pity, her respect ; but for her own need she found herself turning now rather to solitude and the company of Matthew. Every morning she lifted her eyes to the wintry planes outside her window, and the grey chimneys beyond, and dropped them to the grey, fluffy, lively little dog at her feet ; and there seemed in this action something at once comforting and disciplinary ; it symbolised the growth, instinctively fostered through recent months, of self-dependance and hidden strength. Thus, her trouble had come to be easier borne in solitude ; she found that the presence of others made her restless and uneasy, and although, as to-day, her mind sometimes turned for a solution of her problem to exterior distractions—work, society, a definitely active life—such a tendency was merely momentary ; she knew her real solace and the source of her never-wavering determination to lie within.

“ Here's a letter from Hilary,” said Mrs. Norris, breaking a long silence. “ What a pity Tom is away.” For a fiction was maintained that Mr. Norris was devoted to his absent child.

"You can send it on."

"Yes. Listen to this: 'I think I shall come back in the spring. I'm longing to see you all. Petrograd is rather odious after all.'"

"I wonder if she really will?" said Claire sceptically.

"Why not, darling? How nice it will be all to be together again. I expect Hilary is ever so much changed. She's *done* such a lot. The war has done a lot for women. Just give me your father's letters, Claddie."

Mr. Norris, with a faith in her judgment and method at which his daughters marvelled, always had his letters opened in his absence by his wife, who decided which were to be sent on. The top envelope of the pile before even Mrs. Norris had opened it called forth an exclamation of annoyance.

"What is it, mother?" Claire asked, as she glanced down Hilary's sheets of ornamental writing.

"Get me the telegraph forms will you, dear?" her mother said in a preoccupied voice. "Or shall I telephone? No, I'll wire."

The girl gave her the pad, and with some curiosity watched her mother write and delete and ponder over the pencilled words; she seemed vaguely agitated. But in answer to Claire's repeated "What's the matter?" Mrs. Norris merely exclaimed "There!" with the air of one who has accomplished a tricky task. A maid was summoned and bore off the form.

"Now, perhaps we can get on with our breakfast. Pour me out some more coffee, darling. Isn't it nice about Hilary? I'm so glad Russia's a success."

"But she says it's odious," Claire pointed out.

"Ah, but Hilary's exaggerated in the words she uses, just like you are. I'm so glad she's begun to think of home. Tom will be so pleased; he doesn't altogether like her roaming about everywhere and becoming quite intimate with absolute strangers."

Claire wondered silently at what point of intimacy persons ceased to be absolute strangers. And was

mother talking to cover up the mysterious letter and the telegram or not? "Will Pauline have to give up her room?" she asked presently.

"Oh, I don't think so, darling. Not after all this time, and Tom having it done up specially last year. Hilary can have the small front room. You don't want to change, do you?"

"Rather not."

"That's all right then. We're all pleased."

And, as though this led her to the memory of those to whom fate was less amiable, she went on: "What about Henrietta? Won't you ask her to dinner to-night, poor little girl?"

"That's sweet of you, mother dear," Claire answered, much touched; for Henrietta was not a favourite of her family's, and spontaneous invitations such as this were sheer kindness. "But she won't go anywhere," Claire went on, "She says she's too much of a firebrand wrapped up in a wet blanket."

"Poor child. Wouldn't you like to take her some sweets, Claddie? Or some flowers? Get her some from me. Even modern girls like to know they're remembered."

"Modern girls don't allow their parents to keep dark secrets from them," Claire retorted. "Why mother, Alice could read the wire, and yet I couldn't."

"Is it this letter you're worrying about, dear?"

"Yes, and your agitated air. What's it all about? Out with it, mother. Or is it only business?" She was sure that it was not business; but she gave her mother a loophole whereby she could escape a downright refusal. Mrs. Norris, however, fixed her eyes with unusual steadiness on her daughter's face, and answered:

"I don't want to shock you, dear."

"You can't do that."

"I mean, I don't want to give you a shock—yet after all, you're a big girl." She stretched out her hand, and Claire, drawing her chair nearer to the head of the table, took it in her own.

"I'm *very* nearly of age," she said. "The heir is always told about the family skeleton when he comes of age. Seriously, mother, tell me. You looked so worried."

"It's a long story," said Mrs. Norris doubtfully.

"Well, we've got all day."

"I don't think Tom would object . . . No, I'm sure he wouldn't. He's so straightforward. But, of course, he wouldn't tell you unless you asked. It's nothing dreadful, dear—nothing to be ashamed of at all. When Tom was quite young, almost a boy, he had a love affair with a girl. Her father kept a public house. There was nothing *wrong* about this love affair; it wasn't even very serious. But Tom had a great friend, what they call a 'boon-companion,' and he was in love with this girl too. And he *did* do wrong. Well, her father found out that she—that they had done wrong, and he made Tom's friend promise to marry her."

"Well?"

"He did marry her, although he couldn't really afford it. And Tom somehow felt that he was partly to blame. Of course he wasn't. It was what is called quixotic. He'd only flirted with her. But he felt he was equally to blame with his friend. And of course neither of them had meant to marry an innkeeper's daughter! Nor to get married so young. Tom was a junior clerk in the works then. He got on very quickly. But his friend didn't. He went on having children and being poorer and getting into debt, and Tom felt responsible. He started a savings' bank account for the eldest child, who is his god-daughter. Then, just before our wedding, his friend died. Of course your father told me all about it, and we arranged to pay the poor widow a pension—quite a tiny one. She's quite elderly now—more your father's age than mine. He's always taken a great interest in the family. One of the boys is in the works. The eldest girl—Tom's god-child—married a miner; but he drinks."

“ And what about the letter to-day ? ”

“ Oh, that was to say that Edie—the eldest—is worse ; she’s been ill a long time. And they want to operate, and will Tom pay for a specialist to see her first ? ”

“ Well I’m blowed. Any other little thing ? ”

“ You see, darling, they look on him as a kind of guardian.”

“ Evidently,” said Claire. “ Mother ! How perfectly sweet of father. I hope they appreciate his kindness. I should think it *was* quixotic ! Why, they have absolutely no claim on him.” She was not only astonished at the new light on her father, but still more at her mother’s old knowledge and calm approval of his actions. She realised the confidence that must have existed between them when—he not more than thirty, she scarcely more than twenty—they planned, at the time of setting up house, to pension the widow of a friend. It explained her father’s absolute confidence and frank admiration of her mother, if explanation were needed. Then, as Claire sat there, another thought struck her. What if her father’s part-responsibility for the misfortune of the publican’s daughter had been, not imaginary, but real ?—that would explain his actions ; only, knowing this, her mother would not have told her. No ; whatever the truth was, Mrs. Norris probably believed implicitly in the nobility of his part in the story. But then, this confidence she had admired—could it be (based on a lie) a real, solid thing ? If her mother was really deceived, did that not make her father’s pseudo-candour worse than wholesale deception ? But *could* Mrs. Norris be deceived ? Perhaps she knew, and he knew she knew, the truth ; neither of them admitting it. Was Claire, then, expected to play up ? She found it hard to believe in her father’s complete innocence ; and yet wasn’t that odious and sordid of her ? Where, after all, was his shame in having loved a publican’s daughter illicitly, and having at least tacitly acknowledged to his betrothed his previous fault and his intended reparation ? There was no shame in it at all.

There was something, too, entertaining to the mind of Claire in the idea that Edie, the wife of a drunken miner, was perhaps of closer kin to her than the refined, worldly and much-travelled Hilary. She pondered on the situation. Of course her father would pay the specialist's fee, and pay for Edie's operation, and for the subsequent holiday and for the mother's-help to care for Edie's offspring (her, Claire's, nieces and nephews?) while Edie was away; just as he paid hers and Pauline's and Hilary's dentist's bills and for holidays and music lessons. And it was, according to worldly standards, very nice and generous of him. Claire found herself sympathising with him for the second time recently. Even his (supposedly) illegitimate child was a daughter—he had not even a secret and discreditable cause for pride. “Poor father,” she thought, “if what he wanted was a son, he's had hard luck all round.” And then mother had had the stupidity to adopt yet another girl! There was not even an adopted son to give for England. Claire wondered if this was a genuine grief to him; which brought her to the reflection of how little she knew him. How mysterious our parents are; what a barrier divides them from us. A story such as she had heard to-day only made them more mysterious. It showed her a glimpse of their intricate past, and made her realise how multiform and full and varied it was, reaching back and back, out and out; but she was cut off from it. In that past she had been conceived, and doubtless some of its significance was implicit in her; but the connection was as obscure and tenuous as the connection between her daily life and the strange incommunicable life of nightly dreams. That past corresponded, she knew, in many respects, to the present—her parents had moved, unconscious of transition, from one to the other; and yet she could almost believe that when alone they murmured together in some strange tongue of things alien and incomprehensible, belonging to the time when they were young, and their children unborn.

“Mother,” she said, and was about to add: “is it

very different being middle-aged ? ” but she shirked the possibility of having to explain her question and its implications, and substituted : “ Does Hilary know ? ” It was a spurious question, for she was certain that Hilary did not know ; but coming so readily to her lips, it showed how firmly lodged her adopted sister was in the position of eldest Miss Norris. The adult equivalent of the childish rights of primogeniture which Hilary had enjoyed—popping the fattest fuschia-buds in the green house, going last to bed, and so on—still appertained to her in the minds of her family.

“ No, darling. I’ve never had any—er—occasion to tell her. Give me her letter. It will be jolly to have her home. She’s hardly been in London at all. And you and Pauly are quite Londoners now, aren’t you ? We shall have to celebrate her home-coming somehow, shan’t we ? ”

“ Yes,” Claire agreed without enthusiasm. She was still following her own train of thought : parents and children. “ Shall I suddenly find myself middle-aged ? ” she wondered. “ Are elderly people quite cut off from young ones ? Perhaps only a little bit more than young ones are from their contemporaries. Yet there seems to be some bond between middle-aged people. But I expect *they* think there is between us. And so there is, with regard to them, though we don’t admit it. Pauline and I have never said a word about it, and yet often we feel it’s *us* against father and mother. But very often it’s Pauline against me, just as much. Can’t one be friends with one’s parents ? Middle-aged people need everything explained to them ; that’s what makes it so tiresome and difficult and spoils it. I suppose clever ones don’t. Shall I be stupid when I’m forty and my children are fifteen ? ” . . . She realised then that she had leapt several stages and endowed herself with a family ; the realisation brought her up short with a rush of pain to her side. If she had children, they would be Clement’s ; she could conceive no other possibility ; and if Clement

married her, that meant he loved her. So far, he did not love her. Love! This silence, this rush of pain, was what books and operas were all about. Schubert's and Schumann's songs, which Pauline sang; Fauré's and Hahn's, and Brahms' *Saphische Ode*, and Heine's songs. Poetry! She remembered a book that Henrietta had given her for Christmas which she had scarcely read: *Love Poems* by somebody Lawrence. And then Rupert Brooke. Henrietta had said his love poems were good. Henrietta was always giving and lending her books of modern poetry. They were just as much about love as Tennyson and Swinburne and Morris and the poems in the Oxford Book. All the books in the world were about love. Every one knew, or had known, this heavy pain which hurt her side and which yet had its origin in her brain, and which was somehow identified with silence. Her mother and father had felt it; yes, and perhaps Pauline too; no, she thought not, hoped not. "Love hurts," she said; and she suspected that no ache of Pauline's would have gone so long unavowed. Henrietta, of course, knew, even if she had never experienced it: she had a varied although vicarious range of experience drawn from books, and from her imagination and her conversations with people of both sexes. When Henrietta had asked her, "Have you ever?"—and she had replied "Yes," each knew what the other meant; but somehow, Claire had been so intent on her friend's trouble, and later on the actuality of Clement's presence and her own relationship to him, that she had never till now examined it theoretically; had never inquired into the significance of Henrietta's question and her reply. Thinking about it now, she came to the conclusion—an erroneous though inevitable conclusion—that the theory of love is completely different from its reality. Not only the pain, but the delight was different. She must tell Henrietta, some day: Henrietta, with her passion for truth, had a right to know—if she had not already discovered it for herself. She knew such

a lot ; she had said, " Separation is like death." At the time, Claire had only in passing hurriedly, as it were, saluted the dreadful accuracy of the statement ; the urgency of the moment had carried her past it. But now, she could face it and recognise that the numbness in her heart had a death-like quality. . . . She got up and went down the long room to the window, and began to stare out at the rain.

" Don't be idiotic," she said to herself. " There's nothing tragic in it. Clement hasn't even gone abroad yet. If this is the worst you ever have to suffer ! . . ."

She heard, without turning, her mother leave the room, and presently Matthew, who had followed Mrs. Norris out, began scratching the door to get in again. Claire admitted him, and rang for the maid to clear. While the clearance went on she fed Matthew with bits of bread dipped in coffee. The presence of Matthew distinctly eased her heart. His connection with Clement made him Clement's most dangerous rival. Watching her chow insert his blunt little face into a basin of milk and water, Claire thought of Bond. Bond was dead. She would like to have possessed him. Besides old Mr. Parsons and the sheepdog, whom had Clement loved ? Nobody ; he had no friends beside herself and the one or two he was acquiring during his period of military service. She told herself with pride that she was his greatest friend ; but that proud position left her extremely vulnerable to the shafts of fate ; and, without realising her vulnerability, she was beset by an obscure dim fear. Not for the first time the future cast a chill invisible shadow across her heart, and she shivered a little in apprehension, while Matthew raised his face from the empty bowl and licked his chops with a blue exotic tongue.

As has been stated, the members of the Norris family led independent existences. Claire and Pauline were not continuously conscious of each other's moods, and

customarily took no more than a civil passing notice of each other's actions. Unusual excitement, extreme depression, sharp irritation, might provoke a comment, but the subtler, more secret and less defined variations in spirits or conduct passed, if not on Claire's part unnoticed, at least without calling forth a remark. Several times since the Sunday walk, nearly four months ago, Claire had made a mental note of Pauline's supercilious air ; but as if to obliterate this effect, her sister always became unusually gay and affectionate shortly afterwards. On one particular occasion, she appeared at dinner smiling and talkative, began at once to tease her parents, and when the four of them went up to the back drawing-room, opened the folding doors, lit the candles at the piano, and played some favourite pieces of Mrs. Norris's—Chaminade and Mendelssohn.

“ Aren't you cold in there ? ” Claire called, in a pause, peering into the dark room, in whose large lake of shadow the two candle flames, aspiring still and pointed, made a small sick halo for her sister's face.

“ Rather not ! ” Pauline answered ; and, whether because her attention was concentrated on the music she was about to play, or because she was controlling some inner excitement, her voice had a catch in it—a tiny uncertain note of exaltation.

Pauline had revived her practising lately. Claire remembered how, on Clement's first morning in Westminster, they had heard her playing up in the schoolroom. Since then, at all sorts of hours, muted music had sounded from that room—distant, turbulent streams of melody, cascades of notes, suddenly dying away, suddenly and inconsequently renewed. Sometimes it was the 'cello she played, whose familiar groan-like articulation was less audible, but when audible, equally disturbing. For, each in his or her own way, the other Norrises were disturbed by her musical energy. Mrs. Norris, seated in the back drawing-room, would raise her graceful head and tilt her face, expressionless save for the dreamy

eyebrows, towards the door, her lips drooping as she listened, her hands hanging languidly from her knees. Tom Norris, if he were present, would lower his newspaper, or book, look over his spectacles, and say: "There's Pauly," and after a moment, uneasily resume his reading. Often, Claire, raising her head to listen, would bear an unconscious striking resemblance to her mother. She cherished a fancy about her sister's playing—that it was menacing, anarchic, full of pride and challenge. The distant, crashing chords of the piano, the difficult long-drawn notes of the bow on 'cello strings seemed the voice of some spirit with newly-acquired power of speech, prisoned in the chill little schoolroom like a princess in a tower.

And then, one day, Pauline began to sing again. Claire, coming in with a new book she had just fetched from the library, went into her bedroom and heard, across the passage, her sister raise her voice. It was an insufficiently trained voice, shaky in the middle register, but it had a clear flexible quality; in the words of the concert critic, Pauline's attack was good; that is to say, there was no timidity in her opening bars. She sang with energy and enjoyment, and Claire, listening, forgot to take off her things, forgot her book. She had a picture of her sister, flushed and radiant, abandoned to the emotion of the music and the act of singing. Not till silence fell did she recollect herself. A moment after, issuing on to the landing, she saw the schoolroom door open and Pauline also came out, perfectly composed in face and bearing, cool, self-possessed, with the poised urbanity which distinguished her not only from the jaded, languid damosels of Oxford Street and Piccadilly, but from the loose-limbed, gawky, incredibly British Dianas of the Counties.

"Hullo!" she said indifferently, and, as Claire followed her down, "It's vilely cold up there. I only hope there's a decent fire in the larder."

Claire was disconcerted and annoyed with herself for the disparity between her imagination and Pauline's

appearance. She accused the former of running away with her. "I really am Victorian with fancies," she told herself. Yet she still suspected Pauline of deliberately hiding under a disdainful or calm exterior enthusiasms and preoccupations neither trivial nor merely musical. It was idiotic, she thought, to be ignorant of a sister with whom she had lived in comparative intimacy all her life. If her fancy distorted facts, that postulated ignorance. It was sheer ignorance not to know whether Pauline liked making a melodious din for its own sake, or whether this employment was a temperamental outlet. She began to watch her sister, not with an idea of spying, but with the newly awakened interest of an amateur naturalist watching the building of birds and the opening of buds ; and her interest, like that of the naturalist's, quickly became a passion—a soft, intent, entranced emotion. All the minute events and wonders that had hitherto escaped the notice take on the look of revelations. The poet desired to shout to all the world the miracle :

"Behold the daisy has a ring of red !"

and Claire, in a lesser degree, wanted to share her discoveries. She had always admired her sister's looks ; but it seemed to her now that Pauline's especial grace was due to an almost unique combination of extreme youth with adult self-possession. Claire disliked remembering herself at nineteen—only two years ago—the inability of her hair to remain tidy for more than an hour, and the tendency of her ankles to turn over. Pauline had got through that stage in three months previous to her coming-out. And yet there was nothing doll-like about her ; and she had moments of exquisite laughter when she ceased to be a young lady of fashion and became a poplar tree in a sunny breeze. Claire did not, however, attribute any change to Pauline herself ; she knew it was to her own eyes the change was due : that was why it was no good trying to share her emotion with anyone. There was

only one person at the moment who probably shared it, and she was unwilling to have any direct dealings with Ivor. Poor Russell would have loved to compare notes with her . . .

She was thinking of Russell Lincoln as she and her mother came in from a tea-party two days after Pauline's first recurrence of song. They went into the back drawing-room where, amid the debris of tea, Mr. Norris sat reading some letters.

"Well," he said, looking over his glasses. "Well. Just got in? Had tea? Pauly's up there. Been raising Cain! She's got one of her young friends." He jerked his head upwards.

It was the alphabet to Claire that "young friends" meant young men as opposed to girls, whom her father called simply "girls." "Oh," she answered, trying to sound interested but not inquisitive. She had recently been attacked by self-consciousness in relations with her father; and, moreover, youth's loyalty to youth forbade her to admit to the elder generation that there might be something "in" the assiduity of Ivor Webb.

As she went upstairs she reflected that Cain was easily disturbed. Pauline's rendering of "Songs my Mother Taught me" was restrained. She had not the power, or the will, perhaps, to express grief and the poignancy of memory. The alien nomadic rise and fall of the air lacked all wildness when she uttered it; it was the plaint of a prisoner whom captivity had saddened but also tamed.

Claire sat and listened in her dusky room. The song was repeated. In the silence she rose, switched on the light and drew the curtains; and when the sounds of her own movements ceased she heard voices raised in argument across the landing. As she prepared to dress for dinner Pauline began to play scraps of ragtime tunes. In the next pause a chair was scraped harshly across the school-room floor. The blood came suddenly up into Claire's face, and with the shock of her flush she realised that her

door was ajar, and that through all her actions, she had been listening intently. Quickly, she put on her dressing-gown, switched off the light, and, leaving her room, passed through the bathroom and entered her sister's. There, without putting on the light, she sat down. She could hear nothing now.

Her cheeks were still burning, and her eyes felt bright and unnaturally dry; her mouth was dry. She had no thoughts in her mind, but only the name Pauline, and, further back, where it had a permanent place, the name Clement. At this moment these names were merely words. She discovered that her mouth was dry when her lips began to form those syllables.

After what seemed a quarter of an hour, she heard the schoolroom door open, and Ivor's quick, authoritative, inquiring, urgent tones. His voice was always like that, just as his small light grey eyes were always fixed searchingly on some one—some one, seldom, if ever, on something. He always seemed to be observing, probing, questioning. He called himself, Claire remembered too well, an "adventurer"; but she thought of him as some one far more scientific and less romantic than that; as a biologist, for instance, in a laboratory with slides, and microscopes, and test-tubes and instruments—himself in pale holland overalls against pale distempered walls. And yet his interests were human interests; he liked warm hands to hold, ready lips to kiss, and quick susceptible hearts to stimulate, even while he dissected them. It was not his motives that repulsed Claire, it was his cool, calculating manner—the pale holland-and-disinfectant air of him. She admired his cleverness. He had been clever enough to suspect what it was in him that had caused his failure with regard to herself. Of course, Claire knew he never could have succeeded; but when he had said: "If I'd made love to you in the usual way, I wonder if you'd have liked me? If I'd begun at the usual end, by kissing you?" he had touched on the thing that destroyed the possibility of his power over her: that he

had made not even a pretence of passion. He had acted even more coldbloodedly than he felt, believing that to kiss her would be to frighten her, whereas to enmesh her in words would be to hold her. Because she was clever he had thought she would dispense with "the usual preliminaries." It was, perhaps, a compliment : but Claire recognised it as an experiment.

At the sound of voices, her brain had begun to work ; as the couple passed outside and descended, she had gone once more over the familiar ground ; and, arriving at the familiar feeling of shame and nausea which the memory of the slight exhilaration caused by her adventure brought with it, she began anxiously to wonder what she should say to Pauline when Pauline returned upstairs. An impulse had brought her here ; but a counter-impulse should not remove her. Her first impulse had been right ; her second cowardly. She sat still until her sister opened the door briskly and flashed on the lights.

"*Claire !* Good Lord, what a scare you gave me. What *are* you doing sitting here in the dark ? " Pauline was delicately flushed and dishevelled.

Claire's throat contracted ; but she said : " I wanted to speak to you."

" Not now ! " Pauline replied uncompromisingly, and immediately Claire's blind impulse took definite shape and crystallised.

" Yes, now," she said, her brain grown suddenly alert and clear and normal.

The younger girl went over to the wardrobe and, as she took out a pink dress and threw it on a chair, said curtly : " Why, what about ? "

" About Ivor Webb."

" Oh, you said something about him before." The familiar tinge of disdain was in her tone.

Claire was struck for the first time with surprise at such a tone, such an air, being familiar in and natural to so young a girl. Pauline's self-assurance surely was amazing ; further, it challenged self-assurance in her

interlocutor: "Yes, and I want to say some more."

Pauline began quickly and unhesitatingly to undress. "I know you're going to say I'm seeing too much of him," she remarked calmly, "you very nearly said so when I saw him practically the first time in the autumn."

"Yes, I wanted to warn you; but I was cowardly."

"Really, Claire!" exclaimed her sister, laughing—with some excuse, Claire reflected, for she had sounded even to her own ears, remarkably priggish.

"It's no use trying to put me off, Pauly, because I'm determined to tell you about—about Ivor and me. After that, it's *your* circus."

"Oh." Pauline's tone was not exactly encouraging, but it was less hostile than before; Claire suspected her of awakened curiosity. She almost rose to approach her younger sister, who had let down her hair before the glass; but she remained seated out of cautiousness, and glanced in silence for a moment round the white, softly-lit room. Several times the comb hissed through Pauline's hair; and then Claire spoke again:

"Of course he's been making love to you."

"Oh, of course!" Pauline replied. Again she drew the comb down the long fawn-coloured strands; and then, throwing a look over her shoulder, she added: "It's the very first time, I do believe—since we've been grown up—that you've come the elder sister over me. I must say it's comic."

Claire was disconcerted; she had never expected jeers, even from those who, experience might have taught her, were capable of jeering. It seemed for one instant that Pauline had a right to resent her interference—that Pauline was in a superior position and her superior in knowledge. Claire therefore asked her quickly, whether she was engaged to be married to Ivor Webb. This directness was apparently disarming, for Pauline answered "No" at once; but, as though in fear of having allowed an advantage, she added:

"But look here, Claddie, I refuse to be cross-examined about Ivor or anybody else."

Claire felt intensely the difficulty of her ungrateful position, but emboldened by the other's use of her infant name, she said painfully: "I don't wonder you're fed up, my dear, but honestly you must listen for a minute." She fortified herself with a recollection of Pauline's emotion on the night of the dance, and went on—"You know what you felt about Russell?—Responsibility because he cared for you? Well, it's something like that I feel for you. Not because you're fonder of me than I am of you; I don't mean that. But I have a feeling something like yours about him, only different, because I'm so fond of you. Oh, Pauly—I *don't* want to come it over you, but I must tell you . . . Two years ago—you remember the time—Ivor made love to me. He wanted me—no, not to love him; I don't think he cares about love. He wanted me to—" searching urgently for words sufficiently explicit without being brutal she got up unconsciously, and went across to the other girl, who had faced round at last. They stared in each other's faces, Claire clarifying her statement by the intensity of her look.

". . .—Wanted you to—?" Pauline prompted; and as she uttered the words she turned away and stood, with her hair hanging about her, looking sidelong at her own reflection.

Claire made no answer, but, waiting, saw a deep flush spread over her sister's face and neck.

"I don't know how much you mean me to—to understand," Pauline said at last, and quickly crossed the room to the fire-place. Claire heard her strike a match.

"Everything," she answered, and remained where she was while the first flames crackled up the chimney. When she turned, although it seemed that a long time had passed, there were still the pale blue and pure golden tongues of the new-lit fire's first beauty. Pauline was squatting on her heels, and as Claire approached, motioned to a chair and said:

"Tell me." Then, with a slight shiver, she began to draw her hands down her cheeks with a long, pensive movement.

Claire recognised the gesture, and, crouching also, began to speak: "I felt like that; when I got in from the long walk. I looked in the glass to see if it was the same me. My face felt different. We'd been out—oh, miles."

"At Sparrows?"

"Yes. I couldn't believe I looked the same—I felt so changed, altogether. It was queer, and—oh, *beastly!*"

"What happened?"

"During the walk? Nothing; he talked and talked and asked me questions and wrapped everything up in words. But it didn't make it seem a bit romantic or attractive. It was like new paint on an old fence—just one coat, which doesn't do."

"Did he actually ask you? . . ."

"Yes. For a long time I didn't see what he was driving at, but in the end he was quite frank, and I understood."

"Were you horrified?"

"No. Not until some time after. I was fearfully startled, and—oh, Pauline, don't think me disgusting—in a kind of way I was excited. I'm only disgusted now, by him and by myself."

"What did you do?"

"That night I locked my door. The next day he went away. We were perfectly friendly. I didn't feel angry, and I didn't pretend to be. And yet it was all so queer—I shook the whole night. Henrietta shook like that when she heard about Russell—it reminded me of that week-end."

The gilt carriage clock struck seven.

"I must dress," said Claire.

"Not yet. Wait a bit longer."

They sat in silence. Presently Pauline said: "I'm glad you told me."

"So am I." Then Claire added: "In justice to Ivor,

it's most improbable that he'd suggest such a thing to you. It was because he looked on me as rather advanced, I think."

"He must have liked you, too."

It was Claire's turn to blush. "Yes," she said, "he thought I was very attractive: that flattered me. It's amusing to think that he's the only person who's ever said so, or thought so."

Pauline was too preoccupied for amusement. "Oh, I don't suppose so," she answered vaguely; and Claire, who could afford to keep her irony for Henrietta's or for her own solitary entertainment, dismissed that aspect of her story from her mind.

"Don't let it worry you," she said.

"No, I shan't. But of course it makes a difference."

As on a former occasion, her sister echoed: "Of course."

"I wish I hadn't kissed him, Claire."

"Never mind, my dear. It doesn't matter. You needn't see him again, if you don't want to."

Pauline put out her hand and said to her lightly: "You are a brick."

They dressed with their respective doors open into the bathroom, so that they could shout at each other. This was an almost unprecedented occurrence. As the gong sounded Pauline's gravity left her; she ran downstairs the first, and entering the back drawing-room precipitately informed her parents that Claire was insufficiently appreciated by them and by herself. "I thought I had a monopoly of sunbeam effects," she exclaimed, "but Claddie's *Some Little Ray of Sunshine*, too." And, although her words were uttered in jest her sister divined in them a tone of sincerity and confidence which warmed her, as Clement, unbeknown to her, had been warmed by Pauline's gaiety on his first morning in Westminster.

CHAPTER IX

TREBLE AND BASS

THERE was a strong single current in Claire's life, and, looking down, she contemplated it, but did not sink to drown. Nor did its strength prevent her from having pleasure in the eddies, the bubbles upon its surface. She had lived for many months, deeply and primarily, but not solely, for Clement's rare visits and his written word ; but the contemporaneous growth of her friendship with Pauline was not a matter of indifference to her. She was less solitary now ; she had become accustomed to her sister's companionship. They had formed a habit of going together to at least one concert a week, and she had set herself to learn the accompaniments to Pauline's 'cello pieces, so as to practise with her. To Claire's expressed wish that she should take up singing seriously again, Pauline had answered : " Oh no ! I'm rather off singing," and a slight flush made her sister certain of the reason for this distaste. Pauline might not be highly impressionable, but she was not incapable of feeling a shock—a shock to her taste if to nothing more profound ; nor was her memory short. Claire was glad ; she did not want anyone to suffer ; but such evidence of sensibility and remembrance as her sister gave, absolved the latter, in her eyes, from the charge of ultimate triviality. Pauline had been in need of that absolution ; the young judge their contemporaries scarcely less harshly than their elders. The younger girl appeared immediately to have thrown off disgust and the curious reflected shame felt by one who is a party, however innocently, to something dishonourable ; and these two emotions were those

which had endured longest in Claire with regard to Ivor Webb. Claire was too imaginative and too just, however, to measure Pauline's sensibility by her own ; their cases were different, they themselves were very different, doubtless the young man's attitude to each differed considerably. It was enough for her that Pauline had felt disgust, and that she remembered it. Her action was prompt : Ivor Webb's dismissal reached him by letter the day after the sisters' conversation.

What continued to surprise the elder sister more, as spring came on, was Pauline's apparent aloofness from young men, who had formed so large a part of her existence hitherto ; she sustained the reaction long after Claire would have expected her to return to her former, and her normal, habits. For Pauline was to her sister's mind clearly made for love's gay encounters and mock struggles, and her complete *volte face* in the matter of male companionship and flirtation, which would have seemed natural had it lasted but for a few weeks after her discovery, when prolonged for several months appeared to Claire almost unnatural and monastic. In reality she took too little account of Pauline's extreme youth, and of youth's immoderate caprices. A year of philandering had not sated Pauline's appetite, but it had removed the sharp edge ; her affair with Ivor Webb had been, perhaps, her first experience of a more serious kind of attachment ; and it was not extraordinary that a set-back such as she had received should divert her abruptly to a completely different track. The track she took was not new to her ; she had already to some extent made use of her talent for music, and Claire's influence, both consciously and unconsciously exercised, prompted her further in the direction which her talent made easy. She became first enthusiastic, next serious concerning it, finally absorbed in its cultivation ; and her sister went with her through each stage with genuine enthusiasm, discreet encouragement, equal absorption. Claire's companionship was a subtle compliment to Pauline : the elder sister was known to be

fastidious and exacting in matters of art, as in matters of conduct and dress, and now the very quality which Pauline had laughed at in her senior contributed to her own satisfaction. Claire liked her voice; Claire liked her 'cello playing; Claire said her touch was not so bad. It gave an added pleasure to what Mr. Norris persistently called the raising of Cain if Claire's approval was forthcoming; for she was, according to Pauline, "intellectual," and knew what was what.

Claire's exercise of influence was, in so far as it was conscious, diffident. It was difficult for her to be assertive in any way, and she had a strong natural respect for personal independence. In her humility she, too, was flattered by Pauline's attention to her views concerning music, and her heart was warmed by the other signs of affection that began to appear in their intercourse. Neither was demonstrative; but the elder sister knew what sentiment and meaning underlay some of the younger's lightly spoken words. Pauline's exclamation, "You are a brick," uttered on the night of their important conversation, was a typical one and equivalent to the more emotional utterances of less exquisitely and consistently superficial persons. Claire took these phrases at their proper value, and they meant a good deal to her.

And yet their relationship was never more than an eddy, a group of clear and coloured bubbles on the surface of the current which was Claire's interior life. It was pleasant to go to Symphony Concerts with Pauline; but at the opening bars she quitted her companion's side and went deep into herself—which was to go far away to a remote spot where only one other existed, shadowy but indispensable.

The conversation of the sisters was almost confined to music and to trivial gossip. But on one occasion, when Pauline had just received from the Lincolns the gift of a photograph of Russell, they ventured on to more personal ground.

"Nice of Henrietta," Pauline remarked; and presently

added: "Have you ever noticed how things happen in bunches?"

"Well, after all, it's proverbial," answered Claire.

Without noticing her reply the other girl went on: "Besides Russell there was Ivor; and just before that, Clement leaving Sparrows and coming here." That Clement's affairs should count as events connected with herself was itself an indication of new stirrings in Pauline. "The rotten part is that the ripping men get killed just as much, or more, as the rotters."

" 'The rain falls——' " said Claire. "Well, you can't have a war and expect to save your best men."

"No, I suppose you can't . . . I say, the Stokeses want us to go to tea there to-morrow."

"O damn."

"Listen here: 'You know dear Freddie has shell-shock. The doc. says his mind must be taken off his dreadful experiences, so we thought of organising an amateur orchestra, and it would be so nice if you and your sister would help us. Freddie will conduct, of course. Do come to tea to-morrow and talk it over. Yours very sincerely, Gertrude M. S. Stokes.' "

"I suppose we'd better go, but I'm no use to them," said Claire.

"We can see who they're going to get, and then say we're too busy if it's hopeless. I'm not going to play 'Keep the Home Fires Burning' even to cure Freddie Stokes of shell-shock."

They discovered, however, that Gertrude Stokes had collected quite a hopeful nucleus to perform under direction of her brother's bâton. While they sat at tea next day she showed them encouraging letters from Vera and Leonard Benjamin, whom the Norrises knew slightly, and well by reputation as musicians, and from the Montague girls who played respectively the viola and the violin.

"So clever, these Jewish families," Mrs. Stokes exclaimed with an air of amazed discovery, and Freddie,

who had been preening himself self-consciously in the background, came and leant over Gertrude's shoulder to read the letters of his intended victims. The wide-eyed Stokes mamma seemed to think that patriotism was too markedly absent from their project, and continued: "You could go round the hospitals. You might even give concerts at the front."

"Oh, draw it mild, Mater," Freddie bridled.

"Well, anyway," Gertrude amended, "we can always raise money for the Red Cross."

Eventually Claire managed to insert her oar and explain her hopeless incompetence as a pianist; there were many protestations, until she succeeded in finishing her sentence, and pointing out that at present she and Leonard Benjamin were cast for duplicate parts, which absolved her from any duty towards the scheme.

"Oh, but we *want* your help!" they cried.

"Well, I can always turn over," she answered.

"I can't bear Freddie," said Pauline as they went home.

"No—even if he *has* had a bad time at the front."

"And the Benjamins are freaks. Still, it may be sport."

They met Leonard Benjamin that week at the Queen's Hall, and he invited himself to lunch on Sunday; or, at all events the Norrises discovered at the end of the interview that he had been asked, though neither of them would admit to having issued the invitation.

Leonard Benjamin was a very small, pale, dark, ugly young man, insignificant and not apparently Semitic, with the rather unwashed look of the artistic dilettante. Claire thought that perhaps he was merely a trifle freakish until, after lunch on Sunday, he began to play.

The doors were wide open between the two drawing-rooms, and the pale cloud-flecked spring light poured in through the three big windows into the larger room. There the two girls sat, while their mother day-dreamed in the smaller, and their father dozed downstairs in the library.

Before each piece Leonard Benjamin glanced over his shoulder and uttered the title: "Debussy: Cloches à travers les Feuilles"; "Soirées en Grenade"; "Arabesque"; "La Cathédrale Engloutie" or "Ravel: Pavanne pour une Infante Défunte"; "Miroirs." The names, themselves suggestive as poems, fell from his lips with cold precision; and with like precision, but with an emotion so delicately translated that one could not say if it were sensuous or spiritual, he articulated the exquisite, dissonant, subtly-rhythmic modern music, which wakes in the listeners a new thirst which only it can quench. Presently he paused for several moments, and then told them that the subsequent composition was his own: "Paysage de Verhaeren." At first, Claire thought it was mere clever counterfeit Debussy; but as it proceeded, she began to discern in it something which charmed her not in Debussy's way, for it was too emotional; nor in Chopin's, nor Beethoven's nor Mozart's. She began to wonder whether it was imitative of some composer less well-known to her, or whether in truth it was original. She dared not in her ignorance rashly attribute originality where perhaps only cleverness was; but her pleasure in "Paysage de Verhaeren" was keen enough for her to demand an encore.

"Where is Verhaeren?" Pauline asked afterwards.

"Who," the young man corrected her jerkily; "Who, not where. He's a Belgian poet. Perhaps the greatest living poet."

Claire had heard Henrietta say much the same thing.

"Will you come and play again next Sunday?" she asked him.

"No, I'm sorry, but every other Sunday I go to hear Mrs. Johnnie Agden play the spinet. May I come the week after?"

"Yes, do. Who is Mrs. Agden?"

"Mrs. *Johnnie* Agden. That's to say Johnnie Agden is her husband. She lives in Pont Street. She's put all she has—brains; not much—wit; a little—talent; a

lot—social sense ; an immense lot—taste, art, everything, into playing the spinet on Sunday afternoon. All these heavy Londoners ”—(the young man spoke as though he were the citizen of quite another town) “ collect lazily in Pont Street. You can think what it’s like. It is really beautiful. A hot, crowded, glaring room. She sits up in an exotic dress, and beads and scarves and jewels . . . Dark, gold-encrusted walls . . . People all round in dozens—the smart intellectuals ; and absolute silence. This lovely pure spinet music : nothing like it. But you’re sure when you go away it all vanishes. Puff ! like a candle. Nothing but the spinet in space. When she sits on the stool, she’s there : she’s Mrs. Johnnie Agden. When she’s off the stool—nowhere. A wandering ghost in Pont Street.”

“ I wonder what she does on alternate Sundays ? ” said Pauline ; at which Claire smiled.

“ I’ll come if I may then on Sunday week. And then you’ll sing, Miss Norris. I wonder—could I bring my sister ? She believes she’s a connoisseur of the human voice.”

“ Oh, of course, do.”

When he had gone : “ Good heavens, what a queer little object ! ” Pauline exclaimed. “ He doesn’t look at all Ikey though.”

“ Not a bit. He looks what Henrietta calls Cambridge. I like him.”

“ He seems to know some weird people. But he can play.”

“ He can,” Claire agreed. “ What did you think of his own ? ”

“ Queer,” her sister repeated, with her usual poverty of vocabulary. “ But I liked it where it changed into four time from six-eight. It seemed to widen out kind of——”

“ Yes, I know. It made me think of getting out of the town into the fields. I must borrow Verhaeren from Henrietta. I wonder what Vera is like.”

“ You’ve seen her,” Pauline answered.

"Yes, but I mean inside."

"Oh!—" Pauline began with an echo of her old mockery, and then changed her tone to continue, "I wonder why you're so keen on insides?"

"Why are you keen on music? You like to know music inside out. It's just the same as that."

"No, it's not. Music is—Oh, well, after all, Beethoven and Bach were geniuses. You can't understand all there is in them by just hearing a thing once or twice."

"Of course not. Exactly. There you are."

"Vera Benjamin's not a genius."

"No. But I'm not only interested in geniuses. You sing and play dozens of things that aren't tip-top, don't you? Besides, look here, Pauline, it's no good setting up as a misanthrope"—Pauline raised her eyebrows—"because you've been interested in people in your time."

Pauline sat silent for a moment, looking speculatively at her, as though suspecting her of an ulterior motive. Then she answered: "Yes—yes, I was." There was another pause: presently she went on, "But those people showed themselves to me; I didn't have to discover about them, as I know you like to do."

"I know Ivor Webb displays himself—as much of himself as he chooses," Claire answered with deliberation. She respected Pauline's unwillingness to name him, but for the sake of their new friendship she desired candour and precision.

"Yes," Pauline agreed, and then smiled. The quality of her smile emboldened her sister, who went on, in a tone of light seriousness:

"Now I come to think of it, Ivor's rather like a bird."

"What *do* you mean?"

"Oh, you know, birds grow bright feathers to dazzle the females in the mating season—hens, I mean. Some of them dance before the hens. Now I see what all his word-spinning was; it was only partly deliberate." She sank into thought; the train of which brought her to

the suspicion that she had been brutal to force on Pauline such a discussion. She herself had referred to Ivor only unwillingly, with distaste, almost with shame, long after her direct encounter with him; it was only since Pauline had discussed him that she had been able to regard him as a cloud no larger than a man's hand, receding over the horizon. There was no reason why Pauline's distaste should be less keen or shorter-lived. To promote confidence and intimacy between herself and her sister was no excuse for ignoring the latter's sensibilities. Claire felt that she had been both clumsy and unimaginative. "I expect you hate talking about it," she said. "I'm sorry I dragged him in. I'm an idiot."

"Oh, it's all right," her sister replied nonchalantly, but she had flushed a little.

A fortnight after, Leonard Benjamin returned, accompanied by Vera, a tall slender girl, with awkward, graceful movements, whose short black hair and turned-up nose gave her swarthy face a Beardsley rather than a Hebrew cast. She might more readily have been accused of a negroid than a Semitic strain.

She and Pauline began at once to discuss songs and voices and public singers, while Claire stood at the piano looking through a volume of Schumann in search of a favourite which she wished her sister to sing. Leonard sat still and silent at the piano; and glancing at him, she saw his eyes fixed across the top of the piano, on the vista of the back drawing-room which showed through the open doors. Following the direction of his stare, she saw her beloved twig-tracery blurred with opening buds and early foliage. It was six months since she had watched those boughs, austere and black on the October blue, at the time of Clement's first advent. She reflected that she was no nearer happiness now than then; and yet she had been patient. If to grasp at joy, as Henrietta did, was for it always to elude one, then, conversely, patience ought to be rewarded. Music,

companionship, old and new friends, were all bubbles merely on the current which was bearing her whence she did not know. They were pleasant, even beloved, distractions; they made up her surface life, which was sufficiently gay; they were bubbles which reflected heaven's grey, heaven's blue, the bright frail hues of the spectrum. Her other life, which seemed to her more real, more permanent, in which she was more truly herself, where there was no compromise, no social pretences and delicacies, and only the inevitable minimum of dishonesty and self-deception, needed a darker, a deeper and a stronger image. It, too, could reflect; each bubble had its shadow beneath it in the stream; but the stream had a hue and a momentum of its own. Claire thought, too, sometimes, that it was bottomless. She had begun to fear it. It was herself, and yet she had not plumbed it. She had begun to suspect that circumstances might arise which would compel her to plumb it, to forget the bubbles, and immerse herself in the familiar yet unfathomed stream.

The musical Sunday afternoons became a regular fortnightly occurrence. All four enjoyed them immensely, and sometimes Henrietta, or Gertrude, or Freddie Stokes, or even Lucy would come to listen and applaud. Tom Norris made grim references to the Sabbath day; but Mrs. Norris, in her mysterious way, warded off any direct prohibition. Parties were formed for going to promenade concerts; it was not often now that the Norrises went unaccompanied. The conversation was almost always of music, of instruments and voices, of operas, singers, musicians and composers. Pauline was eager in upholding those whom she championed. She and Leonard had struck up a kind of inimical friendship; they disagreed violently on many questions, but seemed to derive a keener pleasure from their dissension than from the acquiescence of others. Their friendship was purely intellectual; Claire, who had at its beginning watched for indications of flirtation,

was struck by Pauline's utter unselfconsciousness in Leonard's presence ; he might have been a woman. The situation regarding Vera was less unemotional ; Vera had developed a doting affection for Pauline, which Pauline tolerated with sometimes impatient condescension ; she was flattered by Vera's obvious admiration, because Vera was one of the "intellectuals," whom, while deriding she respected ; but she found the passion she inspired often a little tedious. Vera would beg her to sing when she wanted Leonard to play, or interrupt when she was in the midst of a discussion with him. Claire watched the comedy with secret amusement ; she was a little sorry for the temperamental Jewess. She hoped that Pauline's pleasure in the Benjamins would not be outweighed by the tedium of being adored by one of them, because, decidedly, they were very good for Pauline ; even if Vera's admiration flattered her vanity, it also stimulated her interest in her own talents. She took singing lessons now, and practised assiduously ; she was developing her critical faculty ; unconsciously, she was beginning to apply this faculty, acquired with regard to one art, not only to other arts, but to life—to personality, behaviour, emotion ; she was increasing in fastidiousness. She still kept up the social round to a certain extent, but with a growing tendency to compare her dancing partners and the girls she met with Claire and the Benjamins, in favour of the latter. She even subtly modified her appearance ; and she refused two proposals of marriage.

The first of these, of which Claire did not hear until it had been definitely refused, lacked the element of gravest importance. Freddie Stokes's youth, and his character, which did not make an impression of being formed or stable, robbed his offer of seriousness, and his refusal of disaster ; it seemed to Claire, on thinking it over, that part of the education which was necessary to bring him to maturity would inevitably consist of mildly amorous adventures ; she could only hope that the

others would be as abortive as this. He did not strike her as a pathetic, nor even a transiently blighted figure ; if he was hurt, it was in his vanity merely.

The second proposal was of a more considerable kind, and it was symptomatic of the sisters' changed relations that Pauline consulted Claire before giving Major Elliot an answer. Her airiness of demeanour in doing so did not deceive nor shock her senior, who recognised the frivolity as superficial only. To the questions : " What would you think of me as Mrs. Aylward Elliot, old thing ? " she answered with her customary restraint, " Elliot ?—Major Elliot ? I hardly know him."

" I know him rather well," Pauline returned.

" I suppose so, if you're thinking of marrying him."

" That doesn't follow. But as matter of fact, I do. He's rather a dear and——"

" What else ? " Claire prompted after a pause.

" Awfully well connected and quite well off. In fact he's what parents call a good match."

" Do you like him very much ? " the other presently inquired.

" I like him ; yes. But is that enough ? I don't see what more I can expect. And——" Again she paused, and again Claire prompted her :

" Well ? "

" I don't at all fancy having to refuse him. Perhaps I ought to have refused straight off. But he'll mind dreadfully."

" Have you encouraged him ? "

" No ; at least I don't think so. I used to see a good deal of him, but not just lately. In fact, I thought he'd sheered off. But apparently he was thinking it over. You know, Claddie, it's a ripping feeling to be wanted by a nice man like that."

" I can imagine it would be," her sister answered in a soft tone of reflection, which, however, her companion either did not notice, or to which she attached no

significance, for she went on interestedly examining her own impressions.

"It makes it doubly hard to refuse; I mean, because of him, and because of *me*. But I'm not in love with him."

"Could you be?"

"I suppose I might raise a thrill," Pauline replied. "No," she went on, "it's not that, really, which makes me so doubtful. It's that I think I should be rather bored later on. You know, he is a little stodgy. He's keen on fishing—well, you know what that means. He hates being in London; only they would have him at the War Office. I can't say I fancy myself as a country cousin all alone with Aylward."

"No. In that case, it's certainly 'No.'"

So poor Major Elliot, for whom Claire felt several pangs of pity, was denied his happiness.

The eddies swirled; the bubbles blew here and there, separated, merged, broke, re-formed; the leaves on the planes and the park-lilacs and laburnums came out fully, Mrs. Norris began to speak dreamily of Sparrows. The war seemed interminable; that it would end was incredible. The conscientious objectors were cast into prison, released, re-tried, re-imprisoned. Bill Osler went to France; more men were called up; there was constant news of the deaths of acquaintances, of the deaths of relations of acquaintances and of the relations of domestics and charwomen and greengrocers and gardeners. Henrietta grew thinner: the word "revolution" began to appear in her talk; she took to leaving the *Cambridge Magazine* in buses, tubes and shops in the hopes of converting doubtful patriots. Claire's fear of herself began to identify itself with her horror of the war; she sat long hours in the back drawing-room facing her fear, not comprehending it—facing it unwillingly and without result while Pauline practised in the schoolroom two floors above her. She saw no outcome from war, nor from her own situation. Life stretched interminably

long ahead, and yet it seemed as transient as the sound of passing trains. The train goes on, but on the listener's ears silence falls again; the train goes on, perhaps for ever, and when the hearing of one loses it, the hearing of another picks it up, and so on, in one long eternal chain of sense and sound. But the *rapprochement* between it and any given listener is so short; he arrests his trivial action, holds his breath, a hundred apparently disconnected thoughts and images slip through his mind—of what the train portends, of its origin and destination, of its freight and significance; it means a million things to him, and suggests a million more; and then it passes.

So Claire sat and mused, from hour to hour. If I could board the train, she thought, and be one of those happy travellers to a place where marvels happen! And then, reminding herself that she was only just come to womanhood, she derided her own trivial impatience. "The war will end," she told herself; "Clement will come home. I won't drown yet. There may be no depth. Perhaps if I waded in I should find it was all silly imagination—that there was no dark well in me at all."

And then one day the sound of Pauline playing Rheingold came to her with startling appropriateness. The Rhine maidens swim and sport on the sunny surface.

CHAPTER X

PREMEDITATION

ONE April dusk Claire sat on her bed reading a letter which had just come from Clement.

The hour of dinner was postponed on Mrs. Norris's account, and being ready dressed, she had a spare half-hour in which to study her rare, precious document, gloat over it, learn it by heart, even, perhaps, answer it. It was short without curtness, and slangy. Only at the end did she discern an accent of the gravity with which he used to speak of old David Parsons and the war :

"I'm fearfully fit, thanks awfully, but—as father used to complain of public schoolboys—biceps firm, brains flabby; I never think of anything except routine and tactics. The chaps here talk awful rot. I do want to get to France; one can't help wanting to be in the show."

In this last sentence, too, was a note of apology for his war-enthusiasm; he wished her not to despise it; he still ardently desired her approval.

"Is that why one hates militarism?" she wondered, "because it encourages flabby-mindedness—anyway, in the privates? And even civilians have to think to a pattern. England is fighting for liberty; but there's no liberty in England now. Can one obtain a thing by giving it up? Oh, Clement, I wish we agreed! But I do understand about not wanting to be out of it." Idly she turned the page, and there found a postscript informing her that news had just come of the battalion's imminent departure for France, and that Clement himself expected to get leave to-morrow, in which case he would come to Westminster, as prearranged.

Claire sat quietly in the quiet room, and thought what these tidings meant: advent, and then departure; Clement's presence and then his danger; brief joy and the grief; anxiety, fear, long drawn out. In a few days she would see him; and suddenly sweeping aside her contemplative mood, came the thought that in a few days she might be in his arms—which image stood for all love, all beauty, all delight. An obscure sepulchral voice in her mocked, "No, No!" but youth made her sanguine; her blood stirred to the hope that somehow, not by her own deliberate already renounced action, but by the agency of some fortunate accident, perhaps by the magnetic force of her own feeling, Clement might see her suddenly anew; might attain during his short stay the full stature of a man. She bit her lower lip, as though to force a promise from the future; as she did so the realisation of his departure broke over, flooding her with consternation verging upon horror. She struck her hands together, intertwisted the fingers, and bent her head, her face distorted with a grimace of pain, utterly unconscious of herself, of her surroundings, of time, of all save her emotion. "I can't bear it," she whispered, and again, on a rising note of anguish and resentment, "I *can't* bear it. He isn't mine to have—only to lose!" She lifted up a face exceedingly pale and discomposed, and looked round her quiet room, as though perhaps some talisman to avert disaster lay within her reach, had she grace to perceive it; and her eyes lit on Matthew, who was lying unlawfully on a cushioned chair, one dark, bright, watchful eye fixed on his mistress with a slightly apprehensive expression. "Matthew, Matthew!" she exclaimed, rising from her bed and going over to lift him in her arms. He was almost full-grown now and heavy, and so she sat down, still holding him, finding comfort and pleasure in his warm weight; but he began to struggle gently, and she had to let him flop to the floor. "I'm being stupid," she said, and, though she had

not wept, wiped her eyes as if to remove all traces of deep feeling.

Matthew had now decided that it was dinner-time ; assuming a cheerful air he advanced towards her ; backed ; advanced again with a dawning smile ; backed again, wagging his tail, towards the door ; lowered the front part of his body—forelegs outstretched—as though in preparation for a game ; and, as she took a step forward, leapt a little way into the air, and caracoled round her, playfully snapping at her extended hand. “ You’re very festive,” Claire said to him, opening the door, whereupon he scuttled across the landing and began to plop down the stairs. Dinner, however, was not ready, so they went into Tom Norris’s so-called “ library,” a small, bookless room behind the dining-room. It contained a vast writing-table, some leather chairs, and Claire’s table on which stood a typewriter, symbol of her new activities. Here she spent several hours every day, filing papers, taking notes from her father’s dictation, which she subsequently turned into letters on her machine, indexing Hansard and compiling books of press cuttings. This self-imposed office routine had gradually grown up during the past six months. It had begun quite accidentally when one day Mr. Norris had, with his gruff timidity, demanded her help in tidying his table and sorting his letters ; and it had subsequently been reinforced by her mastery of a typewriter which Clement gave her. The effect on her relations with her father was good ; the sense of comradeship induced by working in proximity made Claire able to speak to him without her former reservation, due half to childish mistrust, half to youthful intolerance. She took him more for granted now. And he was secretly inordinately proud of his little Claddie, who had turned out to be so methodical and neat, and to have such a good memory—“ a good head ” he called it. At first he had been inclined to maintain a mysterious reserve when she questioned him about the men he met,

the personages whose paths he crossed, the institutions he helped to govern, and the committees he sat on; but gradually, what Claire called his mystery-mongering became less consistent, and soon he grew to take her interest as a matter of course, and to respond to it more and more. Sometimes they clashed, though as a rule Claire kept silence when she felt her opposition aroused; he could not resist occasionally provoking her, half-consciously, on topics concerning which he knew or suspected her views to be different from his; and once or twice her response left him in no doubt as to her heterodoxy; her confusion and evident dislike of disagreement and equally evident strength of feeling gave him a certain perverse pleasure, which she did her best to deny him by maintaining silence and self-control and a neutral air. Sometimes, after avoiding an argument, she would go half laughing, half angry, to Pauline, while, baulked of the opportunity for dogmatising, Tom Norris would complain *à propos de bottes* to his wife that all Claddie's friends seemed to be pro-Germans or conscientious objectors, or socialists, or agitators, and that he would conscript the lot of 'em to-morrow if he had his way.

"What on earth made you take to it?" Pauline asked her sister one day, almost irritated by a course of action of which she could not discern the advantage.

"Oh, I thought it would be rather nice. It is. It's a bore not to know what your parents are up to," Claire answered; she did not add that her new interest in her parents dated from the disclosure of the older skeleton.

"Father thinks no end of you now," Pauline said; "it's Claddie this and Claddie that till I get positively sick of it. Of course, when he yarns to mother she just sits and looks as though it was all 'Queen Anne's dead' to her."

"Well, so it is; there isn't much about you or me mother doesn't know—only she doesn't know she knows it——"

"If I know what you mean. Yes, I do. Father feels done out of something when mother takes it all so calmly—having a little busy bee in the house, daddy's sunbeam, and all that."

"Yes," Claire agreed, smiling, delighted as she always was when her sister betrayed a flash of insight; "he's gone on hoping all these years for a little incredulity. He ought to have married Aunt Conn."

"Oh, the Lord forbid!" the younger girl cried, in smiling, mock horror; and her cool slender beauty made her sister think of a tall, small-headed, rose-pink Darwin tulip, whose petals open imperceptibly wider after a shower, while the sun and breeze dry the drops on its grey-green leaves.

Claire was reminded of this conversation as she sat down at her table to-night, for the letter, half typed on her machine, was addressed to Aunt Constance—Mrs. Agnew, her mother's sister, for part of whose fortune Tom Norris was trustee. The thought of her aunt was unusually interesting and significant because of the arrival, at breakfast that morning, of a photograph of Hilary, in which Mrs. Norris and Pauline and Claire had recognised a striking resemblance to Mrs. Agnew. What made the likeness curious was the fact that Hilary's mother had approximated far more closely—as old photographs and contemporary evidence proved—to Mrs. Norris's type; whereas Constance, the youngest of the three sisters, was of a very different stamp. By some freak of nature Hilary took after her aunt rather than either of her parents. Hilary, in a letter accompanying the photograph, finally announced that she would be coming home this summer.

Claire's thoughts travelled quickly backwards to a more imminent advent. Sitting there, the conviction came to her that Clement's last leave would be mere wasted days if spent in London. So much time slips by in London while one is getting up and eating, and telephoning and finding a taxi. There is hardly any space

for leisured Londoners between breakfast and lunch, lunch and tea, tea and dinner ; that is why they prolong the evening of bridge, of dancing, of talking, far into the night, and then take it out of the next day by not rising till eleven o'clock. Once the twist and lurch has begun in the spinning top it is impossible for it to right itself ; the twist and lurch increase until its gyrations cease—until, that is, the season ends, or some other invisible event occurs to break the succession of hours and meals which jostle each other for room. Two days and two nights—what are they in London ? Where do they go ? Before one has consciously taken more than two mouthfuls of delicious smoke the cigarette is a small stump in one's fingers with a long column of ash about to fall. But in the country two days can spread themselves out—often intolerably, sometimes beautifully—long, like a slow, leisurely pipe, which one pulls at, and allows to go out, and refills and serenely enjoys. Last leave in London is a feverish thing ; in the country it can be leisurely savoured, fingered ; held in the hands or on the palate, examined with conscious happiness before it fades and disappears. She must take Clement to Sparrows. This project, conceived in the library before dinner, came to birth full grown like Athene during the meal. She was, however, prepared for opposition.

By experience acquired so early in infancy that it was indistinguishable from instinct Claire and Pauline knew the way to overcome parental opposition. It was necessary to present any scheme for which they desired their mother's approval with an air of calm assumption that it was the most usual, acceptable and uncontroversial proposal in the world. Except at rare moments—unfortunately incalculable—Mrs. Norris was as open to this as to other forms of suggestion ; her daughters' innocent subterfuges were therefore not often unsuccessful. Once the feasibility and propriety of their suggestions were established in her mind, the conquest of Mr. Norris was an easy matter ; within a certain sphere,

which encircled almost all matters concerning their children, he accepted his wife's view apparently unquestioningly. It was almost, Claire had on occasions thought, as though he acquiesced for the purpose of protecting Mrs. Norris's innocence against the implications which would have attached to an objection; as though he felt that to show apprehension of undesirable consequences ensuing on any project which appeared harmless to her was worse than to risk such consequences; perhaps he intuitively felt his wife's unworldly faith and trust to be less endangered by results to which she would very likely remain blind than by forewarnings and precautions whose significance, at such close quarters, she could not have ignored. It is probable that Claire attributed to her father a subtlety of which he was completely guiltless. Whatever his processes of thought, the result was pretty safe; of course, at any moment he might take it into his head to draw a line, but that merely added a spice of gambling excitement to the game.

After dinner Mr. Norris retired to the library. Matthew and Thomas, as though to provide an opening, became extremely obstreperous, which caused Mrs. Norris to say: "They want to go for a walk, poor dogs. London isn't the place for dogs. It will be nice for them when we get to Sparrows."

"Talking of Sparrows, mother, I've had a letter from Clement. He is coming on last leave to-morrow. I know he wants to see Sparrows again before going to France."

"Naturally; though I should think it would be very painful for the poor boy to see the farm in new hands."

"Well, he needn't necessarily visit the farm."

Pauline here, preoccupied, left the room, and Claire went on with additional sureness: "Can I wire to Mrs. Ellis about rooms and food and so on?"

"We must ask your father. And what about Pauly? We can't leave her here alone. Or perhaps, if Tom has to stay, she'll stay and keep him company. What day

is it? Oh, Friday. I think he has an engagement for Saturday night."

Claire rose quietly and moved away from the table, saying: "It isn't a bit necessary for anyone to come, though of course if you want to it will be ripping. But don't arrange to come simply on our account."

"Have you asked Pauly?"

"No. There's no reason for her to come; you know she hates leaving town in the season."

Mrs. Norris looked vague. "I don't know if you *can* go alone, you and Clement, darling," she answered, half questioningly, "I don't think Tom would like it—I don't know what he'd say."

"You know, mother darling, he won't say anything unless you do. There's no need for a fuss about it. Every one goes everywhere with everybody, nowadays." Claire uttered this with the judicial air of a historian who knows well that generalities are unsafe, but knows still better that the day is to the bold.

"What will people say though, dearest?"

"Only hags say things, and they say them whatever you do or don't do."

"Hags?" Mrs. Norris echoed, suddenly smiling and tilting her head; "is that a threat, Claire?"

Claire smiled in answer: "Of course! But honestly, mother, is there any objection? If I were going to compromise myself I needn't go to Sparrows to do it!"

"Absurd child! *What* ideas you get hold of! It's your reputation I am thinking of. We must ask Tom." This started her on a new train of thought. Presently she went on: "You know, Claddie, your father is very proud of you. He's just as pleased as though you were doing real war-work—nursing or something—more pleased, really, because it doesn't take you from home. He says you work hard, and you have grit."

"That's a good thing, then: he can regard this week-end as a hard-earned holiday."

No more was said, but Claire was hopeful. Her mother

would probably inform her father in her casual, dreamy way that Claddie and Clement were going to Sparrows; Pauline, forewarned, would reinforce this with a reference as calm as Claire's own, and very likely he would not even challenge the remark.

Claire did not despise herself for what she had heard a suffrage speaker call "the methods of the harem." She would have preferred frankness, but her sense of what was fitting precluded open defiance of the parent on whom she was dependent, of whom she tacitly demanded and unhesitatingly accepted all that, materially, she needed and much besides. Had she been self-supporting a show of obedience might have been a pleasure; in existing circumstances it amounted to a duty, or, as she preferred to call it, a necessity. That a show of obedience was a negotiable substitute for the minted metal of the authentic quality merely constituted for her another proof of youth's and age's incompatibility—the artificiality of their relationship, for which youth makes age chiefly responsible. To skate, to evade, to tell half-truths, to cast half-lights, to follow the line of least resistance, to accept the easiest explanation of everything, to be content with the plausible rather than seek the real—these were age's worst crimes in Claire's indictment. Youth, she thought, was ready, at the outset at least, was anxious to cut down sharply into reality; but age is in unadmitted league against the blade, so let age take the blame. Of course, if you could choose your parents you would do so for the same reasons which guided your choice of friends—one of which was that you were able to be yourself, and substitute candour for diplomacy; but, as Henrietta had once remarked, one could not choose even one's step-parents.

Pauline, when Claire that night informed her of the plan for the week-end, asked why on earth Claire hadn't let mother go too, and so avoid all discussion and objection.

"So I would have, if you could have come too,"

Claire answered, "but Clement and I couldn't go off for the whole day and leave her."

"I'm sorry I can't," said her sister amiably. "Don't you think father will put his foot down?"

"If he starts I shall work the 'last leave' and 'our boys' and 'one look at the old home' touch."

"Father isn't as easily taken in as you think, Claire."

"I dare say not. Only at this moment the idea of Hilary blowing in is making him feel particularly fond of you and me."

"Why on earth?" asked Pauline.

"Oh, contrast—or rather a sort of second sight of the contrast it *will* be when she comes. Only very probably he'll like her much better now—as much as he does us."

"I wish I knew what you were jawing about, Claire."

Claire did not try to explain. "It will be fun to see what it is like," she said, with such a spice of happy malice that her sister, still puzzled and feeling vaguely contradictory, replied, with a touch of her old impatient worldliness: "Oh, I don't suppose it will be *like* anything."

Claire was aware of excitement rising in her—a gaiety not to be dashed by Pauline's return to the manner of her unregeneracy. More for the sake of talking than from a wish to disagree, she said: "Well, you can't pretend old Hilary is exactly like anyone else."

"Nor are you. Papa and mama and I are the ordinaries."

"Problem: When two extraordinaries meet, what happens?"

"Meaning you and Hilary? I'm not sure that you are a 'straordinary. The Lincolns, for instance—you're about half-way between them and us. But I say, Claire, to return to the last remark but umpteen, why go and hug the mug at Sparrows with Clement?—it'll probably pour."

"Well, of course, Clement prefers country. Besides,

I like April ; it's bad enough to have missed the very beginning of spring, when the winter smell changes."

"When's that may I ask?"

"In February."

"It all sounds rather thrilling," said Pauline, adding almost regretfully, "I quite wish I could come, only I can't and that settles it."

"Does it? Why? I wish it always did. How ripping to be decided."

"My good girl, you've often accused me of hawering."

"Only about which hat to wear. I've never known you haver about—say, the verities."

"Who are they when they're at home?"

"I mean about things that really matter," Claire explained.

"I used not to," said Pauline, "but I'm not so sure now. Nothing that really matters has cropped up lately."

Imperceptibly their tone had changed from bantering to serious. Claire, her thoughts busy, scanned her sister's face; and then asked with a trace of anxiety what she meant.

"Oh, you know," Pauline replied, with a resumption of lightness, "I used to be quite sure of myself—and the world, and so on."

"Do you mean that you've lost your self-confidence?" This was serious, the elder girl thought, ignorant of how the true reliable self-confidence can only be born of experiences which destroy the first untried growth.

"No. Yes—perhaps a bit. Yes, I think I have. But it doesn't worry me, and don't look so solemn. Only I feel sometimes as if I were rather missing the point of things. You know how music brings you to something—as though you saw and understood something you never had before? Well, in ordinary life, I think sometimes that there's a point *there*, too, which I haven't even seen. In the world, apart from music. Only the world seems to get on without it."

“ Without the Kingdom of God ? ”

“ Is that what that means do you think ? ”

“ Well, roughly,” Claire answered, “ I suppose the Kingdom of God represents being keen on music, and the point ; and the world represents being keen on young men. But a person like you scores. You won’t haver, I’m sure you won’t. The great thing is to go for what you want ; one thing at a time. Not to mix up music and young men ; not till you’re sure of one. Of course, if you can make music your own, if you see the point so clearly that you can’t ever forget it, then you can go on after other things, worldly things. But it’s fatal, I know, to have doubts and scruples and half-measures. You mustn’t even wonder whether you’re behaving well—if you really *want* something.”

“ Well, don’t then.”

“ Ah, but if you’re like me, you *do* wonder. Some people can’t go ahead regardless.”

“ So they don’t get what they want ? What a cheerful companion you are. Thomas, my lad, it’s all very complicated.”

Thomas agreed with a tactful wag of his tail.

“ Thomas ! ” said Claire, “ you don’t know *what* you’re going to miss. Matthew is going to scoot all over the downs and the garden ; he may even catch a baby rabbit ; he may find a wife—you never know.”

Thomas looked self-satisfied, as though he were thinking that no joys pictured by Claire could rival the ecstasy of surreptitious sheep-running in Kensington Gardens. His existence and experience was bounded by London. Thus, when some one mentioned Sparrows, he pricked his ears and dreamed, not of a country home he had never seen, but of sparse flocks of small elusive bodies which rested on the grass and which, when he rapidly, softly, pantingly approached them, rose into the air and out of reach with a pleasant, maddening, fluttering sound of wings.

When Claire left Pauline’s room after this conversation

it was eleven o'clock. As she did so the parlourmaid came up the stairs and told her that Miss Lincoln was in the hall. Claire hurried down. Henrietta stood where Lucy had stood on the night of the dance, pale, hollow-cheeked, almost ethereal under the curved brim of a green hat.

"I'm locked out," she said, taking one step forward.

Claire turned to the maid and gave directions about the spare bedroom. Then she took Henrietta's arm and led her upstairs.

"Lucy's gone away for the night to see my father. We only heard yesterday where he was. I went out to supper and forgot the keys. I hope Mrs. Norris won't mind."

"Oh no, my dear. I'm so glad you've come. It would be lonely alone in the flat."

"I don't mind that. Still, I'd rather be with you. Were you just going to bed?"

"Yes. There's some milk in my room. I'll get it, and a nightgown. Go to the spare room."

"No; I'll come up to yours," Henrietta answered. Entering her friend's room she threw herself into a low, deep chair and took the glass of milk offered her. Claire began to undress. She had, on leaving Pauline, felt pleasantly tired, and perceiving Henrietta's pale, dumb exhaustion, she realised for the first time the evenness of her own health and temperament, and the wide margin of strength which always lay on the further side of any fatigue or indisposition which she suffered. She was aware, obscurely, that her friend lacked that margin, that too often she was living up to the very limit of her powers.

"Shall I get you something else?" she asked softly. "Bovril, or some wine or something solid?"

Henrietta shook her head slowly from side to side without raising it from the back of the chair. Presently, however, she sat up and said, "Well?"

"Clement is coming on last leave to-morrow," Claire answered, and was disconcerted to perceive that her voice

had a tremor. The other let her eyes wander round the room, and then, with apparent inconsequence, asked whether Clement had ever entered it.

"In here? No. Why?"

"Oh, I don't know. Yes I do. He doesn't know you really, Claire; and he certainly doesn't appreciate you."

"How would that help him?"

Henrietta, without at once replying, without looking at the speaker, again surveyed the stone-grey walls; the curtains striped primrose and grey; the bedspread of deep cream-coloured, coarse silk, handwoven in Greece; the three photographs framed in narrow black—one of herself, one of Pauline, one of Mrs. Norris in youth.

"He's not stupid," she finally answered. "No, he's sensitive. But youth to youth, what? You've never been young, Claire, and what's more you'll never be old. You're the heir of all the ages. Now Pauline's young. You've only got to see her pretending to be a grown-up lady to know that. And she *is* pretty, by Jove! I suppose he's coming here?"

"Yes (I don't know what you're at, Henrietta) I'm trying to arrange to go to Sparrows for the week-end, but I don't know if Papa won't cut up rough. And now," she went on, glancing over her shoulder with a firm, gentle air, "hadn't you better go to bed?"

"No. It's only two-thirds kindness and considerateness that makes you say that, Claire, and the other third is unwillingness to face it out. Am I a beast to discuss it? Am I being interfering and odious? Perhaps I am. No, I don't think so. You're excessively secretive, Claire; I often suspect you horribly of the very highest motives. *Don't* be too scrupulous, oh don't! It doesn't pay. Isn't Clement yours to take? Why, he doesn't even *know* he's attached to Pauline yet. You're his friend, and if you want him, for the Lord's sake take him!"

Claire, at her friend's second sentence, had turned from her trivial occupation, and, facing the speaker, stripped from herself the first veils of reserve and answered steadily,

in spite of inward turmoil : “ You yourself talked about ‘ youth to youth ’ just now. Don’t you see that is just why I can’t ? ”

“ Oh, I knew it was that. Claire, that’s sheer over-carefulness. Must you always be cheated for fear of cheating some one ? Isn’t there a right place to cut the stuff so that neither you nor the shop is cheated ? Just because you’re more grown-up than Clement, must you deny yourself him ?—and it’s denying him you, too. Think what he’ll miss ! No, of course you can’t think. Oh, Claire, it’s not everybody that has a chance of marrying you ; and don’t let one of the very few miss his chance just because you’re too nice to influence his choice ! That would be too perverse.”

“ Supposing I did influence, and then found out afterwards I wasn’t the right person and—say—Pauline was.”

“ Yes, say ‘ Pauline.’ Be brave, Claire dearest. It’s now or never. It was obvious when he was here what the situation was. Supposing you did find out afterwards ? Only you won’t. You’re ten times too good for him—I think of course—but I’m prejudiced. Besides, my dear, is it ever safe ? Neither you nor Clement can escape risks. Marriage is a lottery, what ? And with Pauline, or whatever other Pauline he may hit on, won’t it be a dud raffle from the start ? I know how fond you are of her, but you’ll admit he’s not her cut. *She* knows it ; she’s hardly looked at him—couldn’t tell you the colour of his eyes or his taste in cigarettes for nuts.”

Claire, hearing her own counter arguments put forward by another, weighed them slowly, and acknowledged their worth ; but unfortunately their potency was not thereby increased. She had desired to act at their behest more keenly than Henrietta could possibly desire it for her, but every impulse born of this desire had been thwarted by a profound and obscure instinctive inhibition. And, saddest of all, in the conflict between inclination and inhibition, her moral sense upheld the latter.

“ Yes,” she finally answered, “ I do see ; and I half

agree, I mean that for somebody else I should agree ; I shouldn't dream of thinking anyone else had done wrong, in circumstances like mine. Only, Henrietta, don't you see, *I just can't do it.*"

There was a long silence while they regarded each other ; Claire in a silk kimono of white embroidered in wistaria standing with her hands resting behind her on a chair-back, her dark hair hanging in smooth falls on either side of her delicate, fine-cut face ; Henrietta, hatless now, her ashen-yellow hair ruffled above her dark mauve-circled eyes and colourless cheeks, sitting forward in the deep low chair, her thin restless hands clasped tightly together. At last the latter rose and approaching her friend laid a hand on her sleeve.

" Well, anyway," she said, " will you go to Sparrows with an open mind ? I mean will you give the thing a chance ? It may happen of its—or rather of his—accord. You wouldn't think that immoral, would you ? " Claire, smiling a little, shook her head, and the other pursued : " Give it every chance you can, short of poking it under his nose. Be yourself—he couldn't help it, oh, surely he couldn't if he knew you ! "

" But Henrietta," Claire answered in a strangled voice, " I *am* myself with him. I do nothing either way. I want to be his friend."

" Oh darling, was what I said unkind ? I know you are, I know you do. Forgive me. Perhaps I've gone at you too much. Only I do so want you to have what you want, and you seem to be an enemy to yourself."

They stood a moment, hand-clasped, with all the sense of friendship—the strength and deep-rootedness of sisters' love, the loyalty and tenderness of chosen comradeship—between them. They severed their hands then and did not kiss.

PART TWO
ENCOUNTER

CHAPTER XI

AT SPARROWS

CLAIRE and Clement took the six o'clock train from Paddington on Saturday arriving at Rankley at half past seven. An open taxi awaited them, and into this they hastened with Matthew, anxious to leave behind the overgrown, suburban, sophisticated, comic-opera, river-side village. Escaping the last row of red, pedimented, turreted, gabled, bow-windowed, Gothic-Byzantine villas, they passed into open country and the hueless April evening. Claire heaved a soft sigh, and then drew in with calm joy the pure scent of the spring. Clement sat tense beside her, like an expectant dog; until, rounding a corner, between high, grassy, chalk banks topped with thorn bushes pale with bloom, they saw before them the goal of their journey: the downs raised their serene, curved shoulders, neutral coloured against the faint, starless sky; they looked smooth in the dusk; the juniper bushes that dotted them, the outcrops of chalky soil which scarred them, the friends perceived by pre-knowledge only, for they were at this distance invisible to the eye. Now Clement relaxed his muscles, and leaned back. The road led to Sparrows, the Norrises' house, and to Sparrows Farm, his old home. The farmhouse was hidden, though not far off. The Norrises' house, Sparrows proper, was visible from the road, which, passing it, ran a hundred yards farther before becoming a track which climbed steeply up the down.

Before and about Sparrows lay a carefully shaven lawn, on which stood fruit trees in full blossom, now showering pink and white petals upon grass which was mown and

rolled, swept and tended like a putting green, and whereon in autumn, apples and pears, damsons and plums, would fall. The short gravel drive which skirted the green, crackled with a familiar sound to Claire under the slowing wheels of the car, and the familiar doorway suddenly became a radiant square as someone inside lit up the hall for welcome.

Mrs. Ellis appeared on the step, and leaving her in charge Claire quickly led Clement and Matthew into the living-room. "We'll go out after supper," she said.

That meal was already laid in the room they entered: a room by which almost any sensitive person would have been repulsed and would immediately have been puzzled by the repulsion; it was large and very simple, with the self-conscious, expensive simplicity of light stained oak pannelling, oak boards and rush matting. One almost looked for a highly moral motto carved upon the mantelpiece. The two French windows on one side and the deep-seated, rectangular bow on another had handwoven linen curtains shot blue and green, now closely drawn. The arm-chairs were of pale wicker, and besides these there was a trestle table, a light oak Broadwood grand, a bookshelf, a marble bust of Mrs. Norris, and a fine print of "Sir Isumbras at the Ford." Claire's first act was to straighten the picture.

"You'll be a first class old maid soon," said her companion, smiling.

"Probably," she agreed, giving him only half her attention. The familiar charm of the room was beginning to reconquer her; she had forgotten its beautiful proportions, whose restfulness no signs of the modern cult for a semblance of plain living and high thinking on £5,000 a year could destroy. Turning at the door she called Matthew, and glanced across at the young man, who, holding the curtain aside gingerly because of police regulations, was peering out at the river valley. His khaki toned well—too well—with the colours of the room.

"Clement, come and change before supper," she said, at which he left the window and followed her upstairs. Sparrows only had two floors; all the Norrises except Pauline faced the river valley; the youngest girl and the visitors overlooked the fruit trees and the road; the servants slept above the kitchen, which was overhung by the downs.

Claire changed quickly into an old tweed skirt and grey sweater, the surface of her brain occupied all the time by the silence which surrounded the house; not the brief, uneasy, breathless silence with which she had become acquainted returning from dances after midnight in London, not the scared silence of air-raids, punctuated by the scutter of hurrying feet, the boom of guns, the thud of bombs, the patter of shrapnel; but the profound quiet of the country which flows back, when the distant shriek of a train has rent it, like water closes over a dropped stone; and whose strength and peace is lessened or disturbed by that noise, the twitter of birds, the tinkle of sheep bells, the rustle of rain on the leaves no more than the movements of ocean tides and currents are modified by the faint vibration of drowned bells whose chiming is heard on quiet evenings. Claire felt the silence take her ears, as the quiet, nameless colour of dusk had taken her eyes; she felt the country claim her. It was not with a sense of homecoming that she returned to Sparrows; but at each return she experienced afresh this sense of the country claiming her, not loudly, not insistently, not even abruptly, but as the tide reclaims the beaches, as the tide of spring covers the land again, imperceptibly at first, always invincibly. Claire gave herself up to it with luxury; peace possessed her.

After supper, and when Matthew also had been fed and coffee drunk, Claire said: "Shall we go?" and on Clement answering with "Come on, Matthew, come on, old boy!" she knew that he was thinking of Bond.

They went out of the front door; the chow, snuffing the ground, ran off into the darkness. The friends passed

through the gate and walked up the road towards the down. Where the road became a track a thorn bush stood, still and pale in the faint starlight ; and, fainter still, the tiny, scattered daisies made a milky way upon the ground. The air was windless under the hill ; each tree, each tussock of lady's bedstraw, each bank of primroses, had its own aura of unmingled scent hanging above it ; but through all, about, between, were the damp, pure, wild, delicate smells of earth and sap and spring.

" It's splendid," said Clement softly, hands in pockets. " What a good idea it was of yours."

" To come ? "

" Yes. You do have good ideas, Claire," he added with a tone of reasonableness.

His companion smiled to herself in pure pleasure at his praise, and was simultaneously aware of her rising joy at being in his company, in the country, in the quasi-darkness, and of the almost unfamiliar sensation of smiling ; it was a long time, she thought, since she had smiled spontaneously, at and for her own satisfaction only. That was just it : there were no social, no family, exigencies here ; those which existed, if any did, were of a different nature—were the deeper, weightier exigencies produced by voluntary proximity and friendship, and were therefore, though infinitely more difficult of fulfilment, infinitely more worth while. Whatever burden she found here to bear was the result of her own action, her own emotion, her own pride and power ; it was part of her pride then to accept it, to assume it without hesitation ; part of her power that she did not falter or look back. It had indeed been her idea to come—whether a good one, she could not say ; but if Clement thought so, and still thought so on Monday morning, she would think so too. It was all for him, her idea ; and if for her too, only indirectly, through him ; and so, if it turned out after all to be bad for her, that would be a secondary matter. It was for Clement that the week-end had been planned and brought about ; and that was why, at his gentle words, her heart lifted

with joy. She had resolved yesterday to live only through him while his leave lasted ; to purge her mind of its own bitterness, suspense and fear, not even to indulge in rapture ; but to be his mirror, to take colour from his moods, motion from his impulses, and what happiness she could from his serenity.

It seemed at this moment that her task was easy, her burden as light as thistledown. She had only to climb the chalky track by the young man's side ; only to be a child again—a sensitive and tractable child, finely responsive to the moods of her companion, glowing at his word of praise, quick with laughter at his jests, and cloaked in pensive gravity during his reveries. It was the first time that she had felt younger than Clement Parsons ; she possessed now for the first time the elder brother whom in childhood she had passionately desired. A phantom with ill-discerned features, this brother had once persistently haunted the garden of her Leicester home ; but he had gradually ceased to haunt it, and had finally vanished altogether. For many years she had been self-sufficient ; during the last six months her need of him had recurred, unrecognised, and in a very different form. Now both self-sufficiency and need were wiped out : to-day, to-night, Claire Norris was perfectly contented. She did not ask, she did not even dwell on, his love, nor wish to tell her own. With a dear brother, trust and sympathy and ease are felt ; affection is assumed. She felt that to-night these things existed between them to a degree of which she had scarcely dreamed or hoped ; she had dreamed of ecstasy, had hoped for love, but this had been given her instead. It might be less than her desire, but it was more, and more exquisite, than anything she had known : it was happiness.

They climbed diagonally up the down and paused by a lambing-box to light, Clement his pipe, Claire a cigarette. Turning, they surveyed the valley, with its river and cornfields, elms and farmsteads, railway and villages, all indistinguishable now ; and, close below the feet of

the friends, the dark blot of Sparrows, link between the lowland and the upland—its surrounding garden half soft and blossom-blurred, half bare and grey-flagged—facing the river and the railway, but, in a certain starkness of outline, showing its kinship with the natural bastions and rolling tops, the pale green and silver, the wind, the whisper of bent grass, the tracks and dew-ponds and mounded earthworks of the downs behind it. It was the sense of these things that occupied the young man and the girl as they stood for several moments ; it was this sense which was most distinctly and profoundly common to them, though they did not speak of it. Claire's more recent acquisition of this possession was balanced by her more deliberate and epicurean recognition of it. The renewal of contact with the source made her realise how strong the hold of the place was on her. Compared with Clement's uninterrupted eight years of communion, her own mere sojourns throughout three summers, added to a few fragmentary visits, seemed a paltry acquaintanceship ; and yet she could not think her emotion paltry, and all the less because she shared it with Clement. Supposing he had come from his mother's country of fens and grey seas and shingle beaches, or from the lakes, or from the heavy red soil of Devonshire, of what a joy she would have been robbed !

After whistling and calling for some time they heard sounds of panting, and discerned Matthew, who rejoined them with obvious relief. They sat down on the step of the lambing-box. A train went down the valley clankingly.

" I like your tobacco," said Claire, sniffing the strong, sweet odour. " I used to lie in bed and hear the trains," she presently went on, " at our old house outside Leicester, and long to go off in them for long journeys."

" I like trains at night, but not in the day," Clement answered.

" Yes. The lighted windows. And they have a sort of self-contained look—like ships. Independent of the

world and the weather. Going on and on, with faces looking out."

"Yes," said the young man.

Their phrases dropped one by one into the stillness. Rankley might have been thirty miles away.

"One can't believe in it—here," said Clement suddenly.

Claire thought for a moment that he was thinking of his father's death, but something in the poise of his head when she glanced at him reminded her of the war, and, turning away, she involuntarily breathed a short groan.

He looked at her quickly. "What is it?"

"I'd forgotten," she answered, and lifted her hand towards his sleeve—the rough, indeterminate-coloured tweed of former times, livery of peace, a fabric which he would not wear again for she knew not how long a period. "I'd forgotten," she repeated, "but it's the last time I shall be able to!"

"You mustn't worry about me," said Clement; and then with increasing animation: "Oh, I say, Claire, you mustn't worry. It will cheer me up to think of you being festive at home."

"Festive!" All Claire's pity and irony and tenderness, all her sense of his boyishness, his unconcern, his danger, and of her own situation was distilled into her repetition of the word.

Presently the young man went on: "Father wouldn't have liked me not to go—you agree about that, don't you?"

"Yes . . . Yes . . . I'm sure you're right."

"I think I am, Claire. He said England ought never to have been in the Entente—I know that. But we discussed once whether I ought to go on the nail, but he said then 'Perhaps next winter, if they want men badly.' So you see I know he wouldn't have disapproved. And another time he said he wondered how the ewes would lamb without me, as though he'd been thinking it over. Well, they had to."

Claire's heart sank. She wished passionately that Clement would keep silence, or would discuss trivialities only, and at the same moment despised herself for a useless and selfish friend. His words, his familiar tone of mingled reason and self-justification, were destroying her calm content, their silent sympathy and community of feeling. Her happy mood was being stripped from her; in a few moments she would be once more naked to the cold blast of the world. She concentrated her faculties on retaining her mood while summoning a genuine response to his tacit demand; she would not put Clement off with spurious goods. Apparently unconscious, however, of the significance of her silence, he went on speaking:

"You see, I do think war is idiotic; but I've got no moral objection to fighting; I'd use my fists this minute if I saw fit; and so would any pacifist who isn't a fish. Margesson—I told you about him, didn't I?"

"Yes." It was like Clement, she thought, to make his first man friend of a Jew whose real name was Mosenstein, and whom most of the mess despised because he was a Jew diamond-merchant. He did so in no spirit of defiance or deliberate originality; he simply preferred Margesson to the rest.

"Well, Margesson says that if you put a pacifist opposite a German he'd be pummelling him before you could say 'knife!' But then Margesson is so down on his second cousins that he won't hear a word in their favour . . . Claire!"

She turned to him at his new tone. "What is it?"

"I made a will the other day," he answered, "and I've left you everything."

Claire was astounded.

"You see, none of my relations need any cash, and I'd rather some one I was fond of had it. You can do whatever you like with it."

His companion's only intelligible thought was that

she had heard it remarked how every man who went to the front felt convinced of his own doom.

"Well, that's all right then," said Clement, almost as though he had expected opposition; "it's too ripping here to fret about wills and so on."

"No, it's not!" his friend suddenly contradicted, coming to herself with one of her occasional spurts of incisiveness. "That's exactly where you're wrong, Clement. 'So on,' by which I suppose you mean being done in, is just the thing we must fret about"; for she had perceived from his tone that his mind was preoccupied with the idea of his own death, and that he was putting it by for her sake. "It's the one thing that matters," she added.

"Not the one thing."

"Yes," she answered more slowly. "Either it's glorious to be killed for England, or else it's vile and unbearable to have to die, or else it's what the other chaps are doing, so you may as well get done in too. Whatever you feel, it matters, because it's the end of life."

"But does life matter? And what about immortality?"

"I don't know if life matters, only one always finds oneself assuming that it does. As for immortality, I'm not going to hug sham comforts of that kind. Not that it would be a comfort to me."

"Why? Surely you'd like to be with people again?"

"No. Take Russell Lincoln; it would be no use to me to prove that he still existed—some vital part of him, when all the rest of him isn't there. I shouldn't recognise whatever it is that goes on, if anything does. It wouldn't *be* Russell unless it was a thin young man with sleek black hair. People aren't themselves without their bodies. Why, Clement, if you came to me, invisible, and somehow made me know you were there, if you spoke, it would be an absolute mockery!—it would be

horrible ; it wouldn't make up to me for not having the real you as you are now."

"Wouldn't it? I don't know—I don't feel sure."

Clement's tone became more deliberately measured in his unwillingness to be carried away by another's passionate opinion. "Yes, I think I agree there's not much satisfaction in ghosts. And, personally, I don't want to be immortal."

"O Lord, nor do I. As Henrietta says: 'Too much is good enough for me.' And anyway, I don't believe it . . . I say, Clement," she pursued after a silence, "you won't take undue risks, will you? Don't be rash."

"My dear Claire, have you ever known me be rash?"

"No, but you may be different out there. Don't grow covetous of a V.C."

"Great Scott, no!"

They rose simultaneously, and as they did so, a little breeze stirred along the face of the hill, the juniper bushes rustled, and somewhere far off below them a donkey began to bray.

"The moke's right," said Clement, "it will rain to-morrow."

Sunday did indeed begin in fine misty rain which lent the fruit trees a strange Japanese beauty. Towards eleven, however, it ceased; and the friends took lunch in a packet and started off up the downs. They looked down at Sparrow's Farm, but saw no signs of the new ownership, and made no comments. At the summit of the first hill they found the track, on which bright, pale-purple dog violets and tiny milkworts, pink and blue, made a diapered pattern. They followed it south-west, and it led them gradually upwards until they saw a group of ill-nourished beeches, a dreary grey house, a pond, and, behind, a few poor fields. A villainous one-eyed, black-and-grey sheepdog skulked near a well, and an imbecile boy appeared to be doing nothing in a cabbage

patch. The half-dozen white ducks on the pond were the only cheerful objects in sight. The whole, however, was to Claire's taste. It was as though part of the chalk and turf had reared itself up into a dwelling-place for men; the imbecile was less repugnant regarded as a sod into whom an unpitying deity had breathed unwilling life.

Clement grunted disgustedly at the ill-kept fields, and averted his head after one glance at the boy among the cabbages.

"Yes, I know," Claire agreed; "*I'd* like everybody to be prosperous; but I like this all the same. It reminds me of *Wuthering Heights*."

"I wouldn't mind so much they're not being prosperous if they appeared to care at all," he answered. "But they're half dead. There's no kick in 'em."

"Poor things! Why should they kick? They've nothing to live for."

"Well, they might *try*. They let everything go to rack and ruin. The man's always at the pub."

After that, the girl herself was glad to leave the farmhouse behind; she began to listen to the dry, eternal lisp of the grasses—a sound only comparable, in its monotony, its unassuming persistency, to the sound of the sea; and one which entranced her. Even when the face feels no breeze, the down grasses whisper; the dew is dried from them as soon as it is formed. It was this sound, and the space and loneliness, which gave Claire the sensation of being on the roof of the world, though she knew they were at no great height. She shed her troubles, which had gathered round her once more in the night; here they left her, transported on the wind; she even ceased to be keenly aware of her companion; the growing warmth of the sun breaking through high mists was more present to her.

They ate their sandwiches seated where their track was crossed by another, and where thorn bushes grew white. Since the cessation of rain the upper mists had

been breaking into huge white rounded fragments of cloud, which were being blown across the blue, and now that the sun had appeared they trailed their shadows across the disproportionately small landscape, whose far fields were bright checkers of colour, and whose village spires shone suddenly.

They began to talk of London and their friends. Clement asked when Hilary was coming home.

"She's due this month . . . I used to be awfully fond of her. Of course she's exactly like a sister. I wish you could see her—but you will when you come on leave. You'll come to Westminster, won't you?"

"Can I? I'm beginning to look on your house as my home."

"Ah, do!" Claire murmured; and began to watch him covertly as they munched—to watch him deliberately, that she might be able later, in silence and secrecy, to remember how he looked: his thick, straight, mouse-coloured hair, his evenly-tanned skin, tight at the temples, his candid eyes, his air of lively serenity. An acquaintance might have thought self-reliance his chief latent characteristic, but his friend knew his reliance to be less on himself than on what he felt or had found to be reliable: primarily on his father, on herself, and—with a more conscious, reasoned trust—on the earth. There, he believed, lay the ultimate solution, the final cure, the stable friend; to this he would return after the war, to serve and in return to be served, to master and to love. Claire's estimate of him as an undeveloped boy did not allow for so fundamental a change in his character as would make him transfer his allegiance from the earth to another mistress; for this was the most pronounced, and at the same time, the least instinctive of his traits. When he did develop, it would show, she thought, in his attitude towards people and in his relations with them. Perhaps she was mistaken in thinking that it was his character which was immature; but the

word temperament meant nothing to her ; it was not in her vocabulary ; and as for emotion, she knew that Clement could and did feel ; but then so do children, with the same degrees of intensity, we are led to believe, as fully-developed persons. Possibly Claire would have agreed that Clement was like a very intelligent, sensible and attractive child ; a child incomparably dear.

Claire, however, was a woman ; and her reliance was upon herself. She began to wonder, as she so often did, how much share she could take in his future life, supposing he had a future, supposing he wanted her to share it, supposing——

“ I think of your people almost as if they were mine,” Clement said, interrupting her thoughts. “ Your mother is so kind to me, and you and Pauline—it’s all so—so comfortable and easy. When I arrived last night, it wasn’t, somehow, a bit like coming to stay at a friend’s house. Mr. Norris is the only one I feel a stranger with ; I don’t mean that he isn’t nice to me—but different from Mrs. Norris. She seems to take me so for granted now.”

“ Yes, she does ; she didn’t at the beginning—when you came last October. But she does now. I believe even father does now, in his own funny way.”

“ How impersonal you are, Claire ! Your way of speaking of your family sounds as though you didn’t care a damn for them.”

“ Then my way’s very misleading. I do care—awfully for Pauline, and a lot for mother, and a little for father. I can’t say about Hilary until I see her again.”

“ Cautious as usual, you straw-chopping, hair-splitting, precise young school-marm ! ”

“ Oh, Clement, am I as beastly as all that ? ” she asked with an anxiety that was only half in jest, turning to him her pure, small, fine-cut face.

“ Ah,” he teased her, smiling ; and then with an accent of hesitating gravity and with a softened

expression he added : " I can see how you care for them, of course, my dear."

At his look Claire had held her breath ; at the end of his sentence she let it very slowly and gently escape her. Her eyes, which she had fixed on his face as she questioned him had remained intently there ; she now with an effort changed their direction.

They both sat in silence, looking out over the sunlit and cloud-shadowed landscape. The grasses whispered and some stonechats gossiped close by. It was warm for April, Claire thought, and presently found herself saying so. The young man did not reply, and they spoke scarcely at all during the rest of the walk.

Later in the afternoon, when the light was exquisitely oblique and the dog-violets almost glowed, they returned to Sparrows. The fruit tree nearest the gate was a double cherry, and as they paused under it, Claire looked up to see the heavenly blue between the snowy blooms ; for several moments she stood there, her eyes dazzled with beauty, her ears filled with the whistling of birds, a music wild and poignant, yet homely and familiar. She remembered the cherry tree in *The Egoist*, and despised herself a little for having room in her mind at this time for literary associations. " Perhaps I am a school-marm," she thought, as she moved towards the house with her companion.

After supper Clement went by himself to visit Sparrows Farm. Claire passed a dreary hour playing through a book of old songs and nursery rhymes. At last, when she thought he must soon be returning, she put on a coat and went out on to the drive. The apple-blossom scent was strong, and resembled the scent of clover ; it dominated the other odours. She paced up and down the gravel drive filled each moment by a more pronounced sense of childish forlornness ; not so much a sense of helplessness as one of unreasoning fear and desire for soothing caresses, tender words, petting, cosseting and indulgence. She remembered an identical mood which

had occurred years ago one evening when Mrs. Norris was giving a dinner-party. Claire, on the way from bath to bed after an unsuccessful day had been irresistibly attracted by the half-open door of her mother's room, and, rushing impetuously in, had flung herself weeping on the peacock silk and black lace maternal breast for comfort. She had not understood her mood of inexplicable unhappiness then; Mrs. Norris's explanation of her being "out of sorts" and nurse's of her being a greedy, bilious girl, equally failed to convince her. Now that she was grown-up no one could accuse her of over-eating; and the phrase "out of sorts" meant nothing. She found no words to express or explain the acute need she had to throw herself into some sympathetic arms—preferably those of some one who would ask no questions. Tears of self-pity began to well up in her eyes; and at that moment she heard Clement coming down the road whistling:

"I've lost my appetite;
Can't sleep a wink at night,"

and, turning quickly, she ran into the house, up the stairs, into her room, pushed the door close, and, kneeling by the bed in the dark, broke into sobs.

Presently she heard the young man calling her from the hall, and, rising, she put on the light, and tidied herself. According to her mirror, she looked, after a few seconds, much as usual, but her inward composure had not completely returned. Her mind felt like the sea tossing after a brief storm of wind and rain.

Her watch told her it was after ten o'clock; but she could not let Clement's last evening end like this, even had her pride not demanded that she should face him and defy her lurking weakness. She went down and soberly entered the living-room. The young man, who was reading, shut his book and got up.

"I saw Farlow's bailiff, Crewe," he said. "Quite a good chap with a French wife. I remember now, Farlow

told me a yarn about Crewe, when he was farming over at Henley. Crewe's a middle-aged man with a son, and was a widower; and the son went out to France and took up with this girl—I should think she has been a shop-girl—perfectly straight you know, a regular little bourgeoisie. Well, the son came home on leave and brought this girl with him; she came from the devastated area and her people had lost all their things. Farlow said old Crewe had kicked up the devil of a row at the notion of a French daughter-in-law; and then when young Crewe was killed, he married the girl himself."

"Rather amusing!" said Claire; but although her tone sounded to her own ears quite normal, Clement looked at her as though he detected a flaw in her composure. He did not often let his eyes dwell on faces: a direct, brief glance when he met or addressed some one, a slightly longer look if the person was a new acquaintance or strikingly peculiar, usually sufficed him; as has been said, his estimate of character was quickly and instinctively formed; he was not given to speculation.

But now his eyes, resting on Claire, had a speculative expression, and meeting them with hers after an instant of hesitation, during which she averted her head, she perceived something quite unfamiliar in his countenance, so unfamiliar that she was startled. Speculation had gone from his eyes, and instead she saw on all his features the stamp of disconcerted realisation, combined with some other emotion which she did not recognise. As they stood mutely confronting each other in the brightly-lit room, she saw that whatever the emotion was, it was not in conflict with his sense of discovery; it blended with that sense; it was a result or a corollary. She continued to stand and to gaze for what seemed a long time, wondering what it might be. Her first thought—and it was a fear—had been that Clement knew that she loved him; but as the seconds passed and he neither showed embarrassment nor made an effort to conceal his

discomposure, she knew that it was some more directly personal sensation which absorbed him. She did not know how he would look if he did discover that she loved him, but she knew that he would not look like this. Then she saw the expression of discovery fade and vanish; only the urgent, vivid, unrecognised emotion was left. Claire stood stock still; until suddenly an obscure instinct made her retreat before it. She had not recognised the visible stamp of passion, for she had never seen it before; nor did she name it; but a throb of warning went through her—brain and body—and as she moved, a flush sprang up her neck to cheeks and forehead. She could not for her life have said why she had stood and moved so. She stood trembling. The sight of movement and blush released Clement from his immobility, and turning quickly he went to the hearth and began to knock out his pipe.

Claire after her single step had paused and stood now, pale once more, and motionless. Finally, after what seemed a long time, she said with extreme gentleness: "I'll think I'll go to bed. Will you shut the windows and lock up?"

"Right-o," he answered without turning.

She still hesitated. "We shall have time to go for a walk in the morning, shan't we? . . . Well, good night. Come on, Matthew."

"Good night," Clement answered as she closed the door.

The next evening when Claire, after seeing Clement off to rejoin his battalion, returned to Westminster she knew by the hum of voices and click of spoons which came through the half-open dining-room door that the family was already assembled at table.

"They're only at the soup, miss," said Alice encouragingly; and as the girl hastened past her towards the stairs she added with suppressed excitement: "Miss Hilary has arrived, Miss Claire. She

came after tea, and Mrs. Norris had dinner put on half an hour."

The girl paused on the bottom step. "I shall be down in five minutes," she said slowly in a colourless voice, and turned to ascend.

PART THREE
THE STEADFAST FRIEND

CHAPTER XII

THE HAPPY CATECHIST

IT was several days since Hilary's return and a week since Claire had held converse with Pauline. To Claire it had become plain that the domination under which the house and household was now existing was not, as she had at first vaguely supposed, the mere domination of an arrival, for the first excitement and hubbub of arrival had quickly died down; it was the domination of a personality. It was not openly admitted, perhaps not even privately admitted by her parents and her younger sister: she did not know. Tom Norris pursued his ordinary life, with a section of which—lived in the library—she was closely associated; her mother was her usual dreamy, untroubled self; Pauline came and went as usual, gay, unconcerned, and yet not with the old scornful gaiety, the crude unconcern, of the days before she and her sister drew together. There was, perhaps, a fresh froth of interest on the meal-time intercourse that was pleasant; but the domination which Claire suffered, and was sure that she did not suffer alone, made itself felt more subtly, more insistently. She wondered if her state of mind was abnormal, were her perceptions unusually sharp?—for a continuous rumour of activity seemed to hum through the house, like the tuneless song of spinning wheels sounding from an upper chamber. The rooms, too, seemed, at all times of the day and night, rather crowded; and the maids gave an impression of being busier than usual. Claire felt impelled to be exaggeratedly slow and idle as a protest. Hilary often made her a little contradictory, and sometimes,

for this reason, she was a little sullen ; her elder sister's brightness was monotonous.

Claire stood, as was her habit after breakfast, looking out of the back drawing-room, at the planes in their spring greenery, and the April sky. Pauline came in ; she knew without turning whose step it was ; but nevertheless she did, after a moment, turn for greeting. It was pleasant and quiet to be alone together again. She pushed away the confusion of her thoughts, as though she wished to offer her mind like a clean slate for Pauline to inscribe with her clear, unhesitant, upright characters.

" Well ? " Claire said, smiling a little.

" She's in the library with father. You know, Claddie—give us a cigarette—I agree with him that some of Hilary's questions are rather large orders. I mean about what England's attitude towards the war is, and England's attitude towards Russia and France and America, and so on. If I *knew* what England's attitude was, I couldn't say. But perhaps you could."

" It may seem unusually modest of me, but I couldn't either—even if I was sure I knew," her sister answered, smiling again a little. To be alone with Pauline gave her an extraordinary sense of relief and of escape—of escape from that strenuous, insurgent personality into the company of one of a tenderer clarity, a softer tone ; from the troubled confusion of her own mind into the focus of a mind simple and unclouded.

" It is too large an order," she added presently, enjoying how the phrase applied to Hilary ; their sister was a spacious creature ; her vitality, her unflagging interest in everyone and everything, her auburn-tinted brown hair, her broad, high-carried head, her direct gaze, her strong, varied tones were part of this spaciousness, and so were the topics she had touched on at the recent meal. She had discoursed of the Slavonic mentality and the trend of Slavonic literature and civilisation ; of the rhythm which could be discerned in the movements of national consciousness : its awakening and development,

its period of action or blooming, its decline and fall into sluggish slumber. She had cited the Greeks ; and had spoken incidentally of her visit to Athens and Delphi, and the islands in the autumn of 1913, and the opinion she had then formed of the modern Greeks. Nor had she bored her family, who sat with their eyes fixed on her, almost as though mesmerised by her full, lively voice. And yet, in retrospect, what did her talk amount to ? The impression left on Claire was of something pretentious ; she could not quite define the impression, and she had no wish to crystallise it in words at this moment. There was already, she thought, between herself and Pauline, a very faint feeling of partnership against the new-comer, and she had no desire whatever to encourage the feeling ; if it grew—and she hoped that it would not—it must be by the aid of whatever nourishment it found in the atmosphere, and in the proximity of the person against whom it was directed ; she would not foster it. And yet her friendship with Pauline would not let her remain hypocritically silent. Two loyalties seemed opposed—or was this merely a mental counterpart of the straw-chopping over words concerning which Clement had teased her ?

“ There’s something very big about Hilary now she’s grown up,” she said at last, “ although I don’t feel yet that I know her at all. One thing I like awfully about her is the way she jumps from big things to quite small. She seems to take everything in her stride—not to ignore or crush the unimportant things.”

“ You mean she wants to know about our friends as well as about *England* and all that ? ”

“ Yes. Didn’t you notice last night that she cross-questioned me about the dances we went to, and about the fashions this spring ? ”

“ Yes. Thank the Lord she’s not turned into a dowl while kiteing round Europe,” Pauline replied cheerfully.

Mrs. Norris and Hilary came into the room, the latter announcing that she had just thoroughly gone into

Claire's system of filing papers. "Do you know shorthand?" she asked, settling herself in a chair by the fire, where peat-sods burned. She sat with more comfort than elegance—one knee thrown firmly across the other; and yet her whole appearance, standing or seated, was pleasing. She looked healthy and contented, and she was well-groomed; her fair, fresh-coloured face was unlined, her brown eyes well fringed, her brown hair brushed and carefully dressed; she had an upright carriage and fine, free movements, which were only occasionally awkward, and then as though from an exaggeration of fine freedom; just as her voice, strong and varied, was sometimes brusque or insistent from overplus of self-confidence. She spoke always with authority, as though no doubt of her auditors' willingness to listen had ever crossed her mind; indeed, the complete unconsciousness of her self-confidence made her in her sister's eyes almost unassailable: Hilary had clearly never envisaged herself in the light of this, her outstanding characteristic.

She was dressed in a green jersey and skirt—the colour to which, as a child, the copper tinge of her hair had destined her; this tinge, darkened by maturity, was not now remarkable except in certain lights. Her eyes retained the chestnut colour, and, as Claire met their gaze, she noticed, not for the first time, their quality of hardness; she had known opaque eyes, but Hilary's were not opaque, they simply lacked expressiveness; they were clear but not soft.

"No, unfortunately I don't," Claire answered, and her voice, instead of betraying her genuine regret at her ignorance of shorthand, sounded a little defiant.

"Oh, you could learn it in no time," Hilary asserted. "That's a very nice machine you've got. Did father get it for you?"

"No, Clement gave it to me for Christmas."

"Clement who? There's a conspiracy to prevent my discovering who Clement is!" the other exclaimed.

Claire replied: "Clement Parsons," and to the next

question, "Is he in the army?" Mrs. Norris answered: "Yes, poor boy."

"They had the farm near Sparrows till old Mr. Parsons died," said Pauline.

After a pause, Mrs. Norris said to Claire: "You and Pauline must arrange a party, dearest. Hilary is so anxious to meet all your friends. Is next Sunday one of your musical days?"

"Yes. The Benjamins are coming, anyway——"

"By the way, mother," Pauline asked, "can I have the car this afternoon? It's going to rain and I have a fitting."

"But there's no petrol, darling."

"Oh, dash! Never mind, it may not rain. I may catch a taxi."

"What are you going to fit?" Hilary inquired.

"A fancy dress; Leonard Benjamin and I are going to act a play called *The Pierrot of the Minute*, at a show of the Stokes's."

"Leonard has set the songs," Claire added.

"Shall I come to the fitting with you?" said Hilary.

"It'll only be the lining. It's going to be rather a dream, I think: Bill Osler's idea of Watteau's idea of a moon-maiden."

"Bill Osler? Is he the artist man? The one who collects Chinese porcelain?"

"Yes," Claire answered, and added, "You're awfully good at remembering who is who."

"Ah, *mes enfants*, I shall get all London sorted out straight soon! Well, what about Sunday? Who else are you going to ask?"

"What about Henrietta?" Mrs. Norris suggested. "Hilary will like her. She's half French and so clever."

"You didn't tell me that, Claddie! I love the French. Didn't you say she had a brother?"

"Yes, but neither of them are really at all French. Henrietta has no nationality. She has a standing invitation for our Sundays. It's no use asking Lucy,"

she went on, hastily forestalling a demand which she saw forming on Hilary's lips, "because he won't come."

"Oh? Why not? Unmusical?"

"No; he's musical, but he doesn't like people," Claire retorted.

"He seems to be a curious young man," Hilary exclaimed, with an air of putting up a lorgnon to examine a monster, "especially for a half-Frenchman——"

Claire interrupted her gently. "Oh, he's just rather a misanthrope." Her gentleness was due to her growing unwillingness to be further questioned; but her sister pursued relentlessly:

"Can't you get the Stokes and Hester Griegson whom Pauly was talking of last night?"

"Not Hester," said Pauline. "I like old Hester awfully, but she's about as musical as the door-handle. It's no good starting to make our Sundays into ordinary tea-fights, or the people who really care for music just won't come."

"Oh, I see," Hilary returned, "I hadn't grasped that Sunday p.m.s. were devoted solely to art."

"Yes, dear," said Mrs. Norris, vaguely placatory, "but we'll have a dinner-party soon, and then, if anyone wants to play or sing it will be simply as an—an amusement—an incident."

Claire had a moment's delightful curiosity as to how Hilary would take this speech, which, quite innocently placed her in the position of one who does not understand devotion to art. That her sister accepted it in silence pleased and yet disappointed her; she had expected some adroit retort. Presently she and her mother left the room.

Pauline offered Hilary the dragon-box of cigarettes, and the elder girl took from her pocket a small, slim, golden lighter. "This was a birthday present," she said, "from such a charming boy at the Embassy—a perfect babe, you know, but a very intelligent babe, and such a dear."

“ Rather a gilded baby, I should say, if he shelled out little objects like that ; it’s a lovely one.”

Hilary looked a trifle blank, but quickly recovered and replied, smiling :

“ Well, he wasn’t quite *sans le sou* ! You aren’t when you’re a Seymour-Wiseman—even if you’re only a third son.”

Pauline had visions of snapshots in the *Tatler* of some one “ and friend ” walking in the Park.

“ By the way,” her sister went on, “ that reminds me ; I met a woman on my way home whose brother you know : Elliot. She’s married to a man in the navy. Her brother’s at the War Office. He’d mentioned in a letter that he’d been to a dance here.”

“ Oh yes, Aylward Elliot.”

“ That’s the man. Is he nice ? ”

“ Very nice.”

“ I’d like to meet him. His sister and I got on famously. She knows everybody and told me lots of things that had been puzzling me for ages. He has a place in Scotland, hasn’t he ? ”

“ Yes,” Pauline answered. “ I believe it’s a show place. He’s keen on fishing.”

“ Oh ? What else ? ”

The other searched for something to say of Aylward Elliot which was not the information uppermost in her mind. Finally she produced : “ Oh—well. . . . He calls himself a Tory Democrat, whatever that is.”

“ Sensible man : it’s the coming thing,—a *rapprochement* between the Labour Party and the great landowners. I believe Lord Henry Bentinck invented the expression. But Pauline, I thought from the way Mrs. Byng spoke that—Major is he ?—Elliot was rather a great friend of yours or Claddie’s ”

“ Oh, no ; not of hers.”

“ Of yours, then ? What’s the matter ? Do you dislike him.”

Over her sister’s transparent countenance a slight

tremor of embarrassment had passed. The younger girl's equanimity was not absolute proof against this persevering and brisk attack. But immediately her calm normal look returned, and she answered: "Oh no, not at all. I like him awfully," and rising composedly, walked to the door, opened it and whistled until Thomas came bounding up the stairs and into the room.

"Where did he come from?" Hilary asked, eyeing the bull-dog.

"Clement gave him to me; he gave Claire Matthew at the same time."

"Clement seems to be a very generous young man. Well, it's a jolly trait. What is he like?"

"Clement? Oh, nothing special. Very nice. He's devoted to farming and the country and all that."

"A heart of gold and a purse to match?"

At Hilary's words a flush spread over Pauline's cheeks; she did not herself know why she felt ashamed; after a moment she answered: "Yes, I suppose he's quite well off, but he's not stupid, if that's what you mean.. He's a great friend of Claire's; trust her not to have stupid friends. I don't know him very well, but I know he's nice because she likes him."

Whether this reasoning appealed to the other or not she accepted it in silence, and released her sister from the confessional.

At lunch the arrival of the post resuscitated a question which had arisen almost immediately after Hilary's arrival, and which had then been tacitly put aside. It was Mr. Norris who raised it; dealing out the letters he came to one which made him pause and glance over his glasses at his eldest daughter.

"One of your friends has forgotten your full title," he said as he tossed her the envelope.

Hilary examined the superscription with raised eyebrows. "I think not," she answered. "This is probably for Claire: I don't recognise the writing. Will you open it, Claddie, or shall I?"

"Oh, you'd better," her sister told her, casting a swift look of embarrassment round the table; then, to cover the pause she added: "You see while you've been away some people have got into the way of addressing me as Miss Norris."

"And won't they go on?" her father exclaimed with good-humoured truculence, and beginning to carve: "Won't they—er—continue so to do? There'll be no confusion—no chance for confusion, is there? with Hilary's what d'you call it?—innovation?"

"No dear, none," Mrs. Norris answered pacifically. "Don't give me any fat, Tom."

Meanwhile, Hilary had handed Claire the letter, which was, indeed the younger's and which she put away unread. By the concerted action of his family Tom Norris was prevented from dwelling on the question which Claire had known would inevitably rankle in his mind. Despite Hilary's reasons for adding her real name to that of her adopted father's, Claire sympathised with the latter in his displeasure. Hilary had pointed out that there were certain friends and distant relatives of her real father's who, when and if she met them, would be ignorant of, or puzzled by her identity, unless she bore her real name; this contingency had arisen in France where her elderly travelling companions had been at some pains to explain her origin to an acquaintance, an old intimate friend of Mr. Monk's and who had dandled Hilary in infancy. This individual—into whose good graces Hilary had evidently been anxious to insinuate herself—had heard of her adoption but was not prepared to recognise in Miss Norris the tiny child he had known as Alan Monk's kid. This incident was what suggested to Hilary the idea of combining Monk with Norris. Claire wished that she had simply changed from one to the other; there seemed in the hyphenated combination a lurking suggestion of an attempt to retain the advantages of both, of having it both ways; and yet, she reflected, the complete change might have hurt Tom Norris even

more than this. She suspected that he was a little hurt, but chiefly irritated; he was predisposed to irritation with his adopted daughter—it was the penalty he and she paid for his generosity. Claire suspected, too, that he was irritated by the inherent snobbery of the action; at all events he would find it one very hard to forgive.

After lunch Hilary came down dressed for going out to the back drawing-room and found Mrs. Norris writing notes; she did not however seem absorbed, and her daughter took the opportunity to ask her opinion of Major Elliot.

“He’s a nice man. Tom thought not very long ago that he was interested in Pauline, but I don’t know if there was anything in it——” She rose as she spoke and came to the fire, putting a foot on the fender and a hand on the mantelpiece.

“Oh,” said Hilary weightily. “And what about Clement Parsons?”

“Clement’s a dear boy, a good boy. He’s an expert on sheep; isn’t it amusing?” but she did not look in the least amused; nor did Hilary, who sat with her direct chestnut-brown eyes fixed almost in a stare on her companion. The latter went rambling on: “He sold the farm by auction after his father died, and went straight into the army. I told you he had no mother, and no sisters or brothers? Isn’t it sad—only an aunt and an uncle. But he doesn’t seem to set much store by them. His father didn’t, and of course he worshipped his father.”

“Is it a big farm?”

“Not very big; but then it was only a sort of hobby of old Mr. Parsons. He had private means; only he disapproved of luxury. Claire tells me that before they came to Sparrows Farm, when Clement’s mother was alive, they lived in a cottage with one old servant and a few pigs—isn’t it called a small holding?”

But Hilary was evidently not interested in the past history of the Parsons.

“Is he a captain, yet?” she asked.

"Clement? No, I don't think so. He comes to us for his leave. He went to France just at the same time as you arrived."

"Is he good-looking?"

"Not exactly handsome, no; but he's a well-set up young man, rather brown: not dark."

They heard Pauline's voice on the stairs, and Mrs. Norris found herself abruptly left alone.

Claire spent the afternoon working in the library. She had not heard her sister's return but, shortly before tea-time, ascending the stairs to her room, she heard the schoolroom piano being played, and knew that Pauline anyway was in. The moment after, the touch of the musician told her that it was not Pauline; it was, therefore, Hilary. It sounded like her. Presently Pauline began to sing. Claire's mind had until this moment remained occupied by her recent work, but at the sound of Pauline's voice lifted to the other's strong, firm, confident accompaniment—so different from her own—all preoccupation left her suddenly, and she stood on the threshold of her room, while her heart slowly filled with an almost prophetic sense of desolation and loss.

CHAPTER XIII

EMOTION IN RETROSPECT

CLAIRE'S sanctuary of self-reliance and secret strength had become a place of twilit confusion. Since the last evening at Sparrows she had ceased to understand herself: her own part in that strange encounter was no less obscure than Clement's. The meaning of his transformed face was clear to her—had been clear at the moment when a warning like a single great heart-beat set her in retreat. What remained obscure was her stillness, of mind as well as body, after that moment—not the hesitation of the dismayed being thrown out of balance, but the stillness of an outpost listening for some secret scarcely-audible word of command. The word had come, she had immediately obeyed it; but why, and what it was, she had yet to understand. She had been down into the pool, far below the eddies and the bubbles, and what she had brought up remained an enigma.

It was now Saturday; the imminence of Henrietta's visit and their possible private colloquy increased Claire's anxiety to bring daylight into her mind's obscurity; to know the worth and the significance of an action which corresponded to something in the depth of her nature. It was hard to think clearly, oppressed by grief of recent loss, and by the premonition of loss to come; for although she had immediately put aside the latter as foolish, its memory remained. She was tempted to let thought slide, to dwell unresisting in the dim confusion of her feelings; then taking advantage of a moment of revolt she called Matthew and went out into St. James' Park.

A shower was lately fallen, the trees, the grass, the

seats were freshened ; the sun appeared fitfully. After pacing for half an hour Claire paused to watch some children skipping and overheard a portion of the conversation of two men who were seated close by. Both were obviously leisured ; the younger had a worried and a fretful manner, pulled at an unlit pipe and was carelessly dressed. His friend was in contrast well groomed, urbane, deliberate in speech, and smoked a cigar.

" But my dear chap," the elder was saying, " give the thing a chance. Leave it alone, rest on your oars, take a holiday ; or, if you can't do that, work at something quite different. You're stale, that is what is the matter with you."

" It's all very well to say let it alone ; but how can I, if it's not to be hopelessly out of date and altogether pointless ? I must finish it this spring. In fact, I've promised it for next month ! It's damnable——"

" I'm afraid you'll find me tedious, my dear Hugh, but since you've asked me about it, I shall take the licence to bore you. Remember the cliché about mathematicians and their subconscious selves. Of course you know that that fellow who built the Assouan Dam and the Forth Bridge used to leave his problems unsolved, go to bed, and wake up to find the solution presented, so to speak, with his breakfast tray. It's not at all an abnormal practice, and presumably there's something in it."

Hugh's response was a grunt, his companion pursued amiably, " Well, but have you ever tried it ? "

Claire moved away as Hugh was grumpily admitting that he had so far left his subconscious self severely alone. She was faintly amused at the incident ; the irritable Hugh was evidently a man of letters. She wondered who had built the Assouan Dam. Hilary would probably know. How extraordinary to be an engineer ! She began to speculate about the circumstances of Hugh and his elderly friend ; and to weave romances round them ; the former probably had a wife ; the latter was certainly a kind, selfish old bachelor ;

entertaining herself thus she passed another half-hour and found that it was time to return to tea. It was not till she found herself alone with her mother in the back-drawing-room with that meal cleared away that it occurred to her to apply Hugh's monitor's advice to her own case ; to present her problem to her subconscious self, and placidly await the result.

" Shall we go to the theatre to-night ? " she asked suddenly. Her mother acquiesced mildly. Finding Tom Norris in the library Claire asked him if he would go too ; she knew he liked family parties.

" Whose idea is this ? Hilary's ? " he asked, gazing at her with his wide blue eyes over his glasses.

" No, mine. Hilary and Pauline have gone to see Hester Griegson."

" Well, yes, I am quite willing. You'd better telephone for tickets. But none of these dismal plays, Claddie. Something bright. *I go to the theatre to be amused.*"

" Yes, I know, father. Of course there may be an air-raid," his daughter replied with unintentional irony.

Claire woke the next morning with the sensation that something had happened. She lay wondering what it was ; when she rose her own part in her recent encounter with Clement was as clear and explicable as his. It was a relief to be no more an enigma to herself ; but the relief was short-lived ; it went down before the ensuing rush of bitter revolt and regret like flax before a gale. She spent the morning in tormented solitude.

The Benjamins and Henrietta Lincoln arrived an hour before tea. The three sisters received them in the big drawing-room ; Mr. and Mrs. Norris were both absent, as was often the case on Sunday afternoons. Claire performed the introductions, and some one remarked that it was a lovely day.

" A pukka spring day," said Hilary. One of Henrietta's eyelids flickered in Claire's direction. " But not hot enough for punkahs," she answered. " I say, Claire, that's a new dress."

"Isn't it a delightful garment," Hilary exclaimed. "Don't you think, Miss Lincoln, that Claddie's Quaker style in dress is clever? It's very rare for people to recognise their own type and carry it out. Most girls who resembled little Jane Eyre would wear pink ribbons and Valenciennes lace instead of severe grey."

"You're on the wrong track, evidently," Henrietta said to Claire. "You ought to be a nursery governess."

"Oh no," said Hilary, open-eyed, "that wasn't what I meant. But Claddie's personality suggests—perhaps it's more the author of *Jane Eyre*—a sort of urban Brontë." She glanced complacently round, and realised that Pauline and the Benjamins were not listening, having moved across to the piano.

Pauline and Vera, taller than the rest and much of a height, were bent together over some music, contrasted like girls in a Victorian Christmas supplement, blonde and brunette. The former wore a pleated skirt and a delicate white blouse; the latter a jerkin of reddish hand-woven material, embroidered in the Russian fashion.

"Sing 'I went into the Garden in my Green Hat,'" Henrietta begged, and Leonard seating himself broke immediately into the accompaniment. He had, however, to cease and begin again with the singer. Afterwards he began to question Pauline about her Moon-Maiden dress.

"I went with Pauly to her first fitting," Hilary told him. "It's going to be *just* right, I think—just Pauly's style."

"It's more important that it should be the Moon-Maiden's style," Leonard remarked softly.

"You see, *you're* not a nursery governess," said Henrietta to the youngest of the Norrises.

"What *do* you mean?"

"She's only being silly," Claire explained. "Hilary said I was like Jane Eyre."

"Oh, what am I like, Hilary?" Pauline asked. Hilary

silently gathered herself together in preparation for her *mot*. "You're—you're very modern, and yet you're Georgian, or Romney. I think a twentieth-century Romney describes you best."

There was a pause—perhaps of admiration—after this pronouncement; finally music was resumed.

After tea, Claire and Henrietta escaped upstairs, followed by Matthew.

"Elle est assommante, ta sœur," Henrietta murmured, "elle a l'œil fixe. Her stare mesmerises one and galvanises one at the same time: I don't like it. I feel like a fascinated rabbit which can't help twitting the snake."

"There's something rather impressive about her, though, don't you think?" Claire protested loyally.

"She's a fine figure of a woman if that's what you mean . . . I'm sorry, Claire, if I'm being nasty. She makes me feel perverse."

"It's not only her appearance I mean. She seems to have rather a grasp of things."

"Doubtless there's a fine view from the Albert Memorial, but I'd rather not live with it, all the same."

"Oh, I don't know, Henrietta; I like to go up and get views, and so do you. And if you had to live with the A.M. you'd make the best of it."

"Of course, and I'd teach it eye-exercises. One has water-softener, why not eye-softener? Talking of carrying out one's style, she oughtn't to wear green. It's a dreadful mistake that people who have red or auburn hair always make; and she hasn't even that excuse. If she wants to dress to her personality, it ought to be primary colours, red or blue, or if green, only mixed with other things in a pattern; one of those horrible chintzes of bright carmine peonies and green leaves would suit her . . . Well?"

They had entered Claire's room, and Henrietta sat in the chair she had occupied on the night before Clement's leave. Her companion closed the door gently and stood

for a few moments looking past her out of the window, under which Matthew lay down.

"Have you heard from Clement since he left?" Henrietta asked.

The other shook her head, still not speaking. She felt in her heart a strange conflict beginning; a conflict between her revolt against pain and a deathlike resignation which had begun to creep over her. She stood, contemplating it. Then she moved and sat down.

"No, I haven't heard. He didn't leave England on Monday—he only went back to camp. I expect he's been fearfully busy."

Henrietta nodded seriously; presently, having examined her friend's face, where strain was visible, she said: "Tell me what happened."

"Perhaps I think more happened than really did. It was on Sunday night——" Claire broke off, and began again. "After supper on Sunday, Clement went across to the farm. I don't know why, but I felt absolutely miserable—'left.' I'd have given anything to have you or Pauline or mother there. I cried—wasn't it idiotic? When he came back I went into the sitting-room and we talked quite ordinarily. Then suddenly—I don't remember what I'd said—his face quite altered. It was extraordinary. I don't think I *could* have imagined it; in fact I know I didn't."

"How was it?"

"Burning and bright, and yet sort of blurred—like a light through a veil. I know what it was. I knew then, really."

Henrietta, whose eyes did not quit Claire's face throughout the latter's narrative, asked: "What did you do?"

Claire answered with an awful, a gentle lucidity: "I did nothing. That was just it; it was for me to take it or leave it, and I left it."

They sat for a time in silence, Claire's eyes fixed on the floor as she rehearsed the scene in imagination; Henrietta, wondering and pondering, puzzled but patient. At last

the latter said: "Wasn't that what you wanted, then?"

Claire turned on her eyes, dark with intense feeling, and hesitated. "No," she said, and, with an effort, went on: "It wasn't that he was looking at *me*—I might have been anyone, I felt he didn't see the real me at all. He had almost a look of being absorbed in himself."

"As if you were a projection of his mind?" Henrietta suggested softly.

"Perhaps like that; yet his face was bright. It wasn't the way he looked at Pauline—it wasn't the right way."

"Are you sure? Perhaps it *was* the right way, only you'd never seen it before."

"But I knew what it meant," Claire persisted slowly. "I knew then—after the first moment when I thought he'd spotted that I—that I—— Yes, I realised that it was what men feel: desire, or whatever you choose to call it. What I *didn't* know was, whether I could answer it or not; and then, suddenly, I *did* know."

"That it wasn't what you wanted?"

"That it wasn't the right look, the right feeling. It was only, I suppose, because I was a girl, and that we were alone there—oh, I can't say what caused it."

After a silence Henrietta said: "You said just now, Claire, *what men feel*. But you know, women feel it too."

Claire rose and stood before her, questioningly. "Do you mean," she presently asked, "that I—ought to have; that I am cold—that you think I don't love him because I let that pass?"

"O God no! I know you love him. I didn't mean that. But I thought perhaps you didn't love him quite that way yet; as you've not come across it."

"You may be right," Claire answered slowly, "but I don't think so. I feel sure in my own mind that, if he'd loved me first, just only for a few moments first, it would have been all right. I could have responded to anything then; yes to *anything*. I'd do everything he wanted if he loved me a little first. But without that—seeing

that other feeling, all by itself—I couldn't. He can love, you see. I think he does love Pauline." She turned away on these words, and going to the window, leaned her arms on the cross-bar, and her face on her arms. Looking up presently with soundless tears running down her face, she saw a servant looking at her curiously from a window opposite, and with a shock of distaste at having been watched she instantly left the window, and returned to her chair. Her thoughts had passed to the final parting on Monday at the station, her intolerable sensation of being alive only in her capacity for pain; her constricted throat and aching mouth; her heart a core of misery; all her strength occupied in keeping back tears. The trucks and people, Clement and the train, had appeared as blurred and wavering bodies; she had dropped behind the young man, wiped her eyes, and, with an effort which stretched the muscles of her forehead and temples, smiled; it was an easier expression to preserve than a neutral one, but to an onlooker it had seemed almost a grimace.

She suddenly came back to the present, to Henrietta and her room. "I saw him off," she said. "He told me how good everyone had been to him—my family and our friends. He talked about whether he'd been justified in taking a commission; and about Matthew. He said a chow was much more like me than a bulldog—thinking of Thomas, of course. Then the train started. He leant out all the time, till it was out of sight. I felt as though the train was dragging my inside out and away with it; as if nothing was left of me but a sort of lifeless shell."

She stopped, staring before her, while the tears coursed down. Then, dropping on her knees beside Henrietta, she hid her face in her friend's lap and sobbed in absolute abandonment of grief. Henrietta, without speaking, put her hands on the convulsed shoulders; and they stayed thus for a long time.

CHAPTER XIV

A WOMAN OF THE WORLD

CLAIRE had for the fourth time re-read Clement's post card announcing his arrival in France when Hilary entered the library.

"I've just seen father off in the car," she announced. "I thought I'd see what you were up to. Can I help?"

"No," Claire answered. "I mean, I've only got to go through these receipts. I'll come up and do them in the larder." She put out the gas-fire and led the way into the back drawing-room.

It was a wet morning—that immediately followed on the musical Sunday. Pauline was at the Benjamins' rehearsing; Mrs. Norris was holding a vaguely benevolent committee meeting in the dining-room.

Hilary disposed herself briskly in a chair with its back to the light. Claire placed a basket at her own feet and began to sort the bundle of papers, tearing up some, and placing others aside: she appeared to be giving her whole attention to this business, but in reality she was thinking all the while of Clement, and using only a small portion of her brain to notice the dates on the receipts, and to dispose of them accordingly.

After some moments' silent contemplation of her sister, Hilary stretched out a hand, and took from the table a large green silk work-bag from which she drew a linen and lace undergarment. She began to sew rapidly and easily, cutting her threads with fine gilt-handled scissors, and threading her tiny needle with a brief unhesitating gesture.

"I am going to Aunt Connie's for a week on the seventeenth," she presently remarked, "and I've been trying to

persuade Pauline to come too. Aunt Connie herself suggested that one of you should come."

"Oh," said Claire, a little taken aback, "this is the first I've heard of it."

"Well, I knew you were very much taken up with father."

"Not so much as all that! However, I can easily go and stay with her any time. Is Pauline going with you?"

"She hasn't made up her mind yet," Hilary replied, letting her hands containing the work sink to her knees, and fixing her wide-open eyes on her sister. "She seems to think that she ought to stay in town because of this play; but I don't see that there's such a hurry about it; they can do it at any time."

"They've just arranged to do it on July 1st, which is Mrs. Benjamin's birthday. She always has a garden party on that day—they have a house in Regent's Park, and everyone agreed that it would be a good idea to combine them. There's going to be a collection for the Serbian Red Cross."

"Well, it's only the third week in April now. That gives them two and a half months to rehearse. And really, Claddie, I do wish Pauline wasn't mixed up with these Jews." She spoke in her usual strong, rather insistent tone, without irritation.

"Oh . . . Why?"

"Well, after all, money isn't everything."

Claire was astounded; such naïveness was scarcely credible. She gave her sister one swift look of surprise, and then went on with her sorting.

"And for a girl of Pauline's calibre to be going about with a grubby little pacifist! . . . She's ten times too good for long-haired cranks."

Claire searched for an answer among the indignant words which crowded her tongue.

"I don't think," she finally said, "that you can dismiss Leonard and Vera as grubby little cranks. The Benjamins

are a very cultivated, artistic family; Leonard is a fine musician. He's done Pauline no end of good."

"Oh, I dare say he's got the taste, and can play the piano—I don't deny that. I don't think you see my point, Claddie. After all, Pauline isn't going to make a profession of music; if she was, Leonard Benjamin might be very useful——"

"It isn't a question of *use*," Claire interrupted with unusual warmth, a very faint flush tingeing her cheeks, "it's a question of who Pauline chooses to be friends with."

"But you yourself said he'd done her no end of good," Hilary pointed out with the air of a logician.

"Yes, incidentally he has. He's helped to develop her—her critical faculty, I suppose you'd call it; he's made her think; he's a clever man. I admit he looks grubby; but one can't have everything."

"I'd rather have him clean and less of a musician," said Hilary calmly.

Claire respected the candour of this admission, and answered, "Yes, but I suppose Pauline wouldn't."

"I must say that strikes me as extraordinary, in a girl of Pauline's stamp. Of course, it's mere chance that's brought her and them together; it's only sheer unconsciousness of her own type which lets her consort with them. She's got looks and intelligence and breeding, and here she is wasting her time with——"

"Yes, I know; but don't say any more about Leonard's political opinions, because you see I share them, and so do the Lincolns."

It was Hilary's turn to be astounded; she frankly stared. "Claddie! Of course, I'm rather a Socialist myself; but if you're talking about the war, you'll admit that Labour is soundly patriotic; it's only a few absolute cranks who are——"

"Oh, Hilary, *do* you mind not? . . . I do loathe arguments. I'd rather you went on about Pauline."

"Well, if you won't defend your opinions! What I

really meant to ask you was, whether *you* hadn't had a lot to do with Pauline taking up with this set ? ”

“ Perhaps I had. When she joined the Stokes's orchestra we got to know the Benjamins ; and then we started having them here regularly. I don't think that was any more my doing than hers. What I did do was to encourage her to sing and play and practice. And after all, Hilary, when you talk about ‘ this set,’ what do you mean ? Do you object to the Stokeses, and Hester, too ? ”

“ Not at all. They seem to me negligible. What I'm thinking about is Pauly's future. I know you don't set up to be a woman of the world, Claddie, but it must have occurred to you that Pauly has got to settle down some time.”

“ Some time in the next ten years.”

“ Thirty may not be too late for people of your mentality,” Hilary replied with her manner of enunciating incontrovertible truths, at which her sister smiled unnoticed into her lap. “ But it's obvious that Pauline needs an assured position—a background. And with her personality and looks she could have it for a nod of the head. Now, I haven't discussed the question with her ; but of course she must have had at least one chance of marrying—I mean besides that Stokes boy ; and I can make a guess at the man.” Her tone was a trifle triumphant.

Claire's thoughts immediately flew to Ivor Webb ; but, as far as she knew, he had not been mentioned in Hilary's presence. She kept silent, and Miss Monk-Norris went on : “ From what I know of Major Elliot, I think it was a *great* pity she didn't encourage him.”

“ Unfortunately for him, she didn't care for him,” Claire answered, ignoring this, the second, imputation of her responsibility which she discerned in Hilary's tone.

“ But my dear Claddie, anyone who's had the experience of people that I have, and the opportunity of observing them, can see that Pauline is extremely adaptable.” She paused, and her companion, who had finished her task, rose and said quickly :

"I suppose you mean that *some one* ought to have influenced Pauline to make her adapt herself to Major Elliot."

"He has a very good position, and means; he's thoroughly suitable."

"But as you said just now," Claire, still standing, answered sharply, "after all, money isn't everything."

"I don't suppose you'll deny," Hilary remarked calmly, ceasing to sew, and fixing her eyes on her sister, "that Major Elliot is a nice man—suitable in every way? Have you anyone better up your sleeve?"

Claire remained motionless, her wrath transforming itself into puzzled speculation. What species of woman was this, at once so close and familiar, so alien and incomprehensible? "No," she at last brought out, "but then, you see, I don't make it my object in life to marry Pauline off. She's very young. I think it would be an awful pity if she was only taken up with men and getting married. You think she's too good for the Benjamins; I dare say she is. I think she's too good to marry for position. She can be a social success as well as other things. She's intelligent enough to be lots of things."

"Yes, yes, I agree. Once her position is assured, her music and so on will be a wonderful asset."

"What's wrong with her position now?"

"You don't understand what I'm driving at, Claddie. Sit down, and I'll try to make it clear."

Unwillingly, feeling like a lectured child, Claire re-seated herself. Her inclination was to go straight from the room; but her desire to be fair, not to misjudge, as well as her curiosity, caused her to obey.

"I want everybody to be themselves," Hilary announced with the air of an oracle, and resuming her sewing. "The great thing in life, it seems to me, is to recognise one's own bent, one's own type and personality, and to shape one's destiny accordingly. Now Pauline, as perhaps you have realised, is, so to speak, a Queen of Love. She might be a reincarnation of a Provençal lady, or a Georgian

beauty. She must have, to be in her right *milieu*, a lord, a castle and admirers. I don't mean anything questionable, of course. She must have an assured position in good society; and on this foundation she can do as much decoration as she likes, as long, of course, as she doesn't go in so seriously for something that spoils the picture."

"I see," said Claire truthfully.

"Now you," Hilary went on, "are a totally different type. As I said yesterday, you're an urban Brontë. Marriage is not essential for your background."

"Am I fated to do good works?" Claire asked, as one asks a fortune-teller, with dissembled irony.

"Ah! I shall have to study you a little more before I can say."

"And what about you?"

Hilary gave a short, self-conscious laugh and answered: "I'm rather afraid I'm destined to be a guide, philosopher and friend to other persons of both sexes. At least, that's been my job so far; and after all, if one's useful, one mustn't complain. That reminds me; I heard this morning from a charming Belgian boy, whose family I met before the war. I spent part of the summer of 1914 with them. He's a poet, and is now working in London. He wants to call here."

"How interesting. What's his name?" her sister asked with relief at the change of topic.

"Felix Gregoire."

"Let's have him to dinner one night this week," Claire suggested.

"Yes. He gave me these scissors, because of a joke we had about my being one of the Parques—'Weavers of Destiny,' you know," Hilary translated; "in fact he dedicated a poem called 'Tisseuse des Sorts' to me. He got wounded in the arm last year, and his mother tells me he will never be able to bend his left arm."

Claire had a slightly stunned sensation; she found her sister's voice, though coloured and varied, a little too

insistent. "I think I hear mother," she said, rising and making a move towards silence and exclusion.

"Yes," Hilary agreed, "I hear sounds of her and her cronies issuing forth."

The dinner was arranged for Thursday—the night before Hilary and Pauline departed on their visit to their aunt, Mrs. Agnew. Pauline was going for a long week-end only.

It happened that Bill Osler was on leave. Claire going to see the Lincolns on the Tuesday evening found him there, and invited him and Henrietta to the proposed dinner-party. Henrietta preferred to cleave to a long-standing engagement she had with Lucy to hear Rosing sing; but Bill accepted Claire's invitation. He moreover gave her news of Clement, whom he had met by arrangement at Ypres one day recently.

"He was in rather a stew about a pal of his who had been badly hit the very first time they went over the top," Bill told her. "A chap called Margesson."

"Oh, dear!" said Claire. "Yes, I know. Clement made great friends with him when they were in camp. Has he come over to England?"

"No, he's too bad, poor chap. Parsons seemed to think he was going to die."

"Oh, poor Clement!" said Henrietta.

Lucy made no sound but pulled at his pipe; lying almost prone in a deep chair, his legs, it seemed to Claire, stretched half across the room.

Returning home, Claire found a letter from Clement, containing the same information. His spirits were low; he had obviously become still more attached to Margesson since they had together gone into the first line, and taken part in battle. Claire wrote to him as best she could, taking comfort from his ability still to confide in her, to write to her as a friend.

The other guest on Thursday, besides Bill Osler and Felix Gregoire, was an elderly young Conservative who

was nursing a Midland constituency, and for whom Tom Norris had once or twice spoken at meetings. Hilary began immediately and with great success to draw him out, while her sisters jested amicably with the less solemn pair.

The young Belgian poet was indeed much less solemn than Claire had expected. He talked in French, with a humour one guessed at rather than saw or heard, about his reception in England. Claire asked him if he minded being addressed in English, adding that probably their French would pain him extremely. He replied that it was his duty to hear and to learn English, but that he could not resist talking French to those who understood it, and that he often yearned to hear his own language.

"If you will come and see us again soon, monsieur," Claire said, "I will ask a great friend of mine to meet you who is half French, and speaks perfectly."

"Are you telling Felix of Henrietta Lincoln?" Hilary interposed, and then addressing the young Belgian, "*Miss Lincoln est tout ce qu'il y a de plus moderne, vous savez. Elle n'est pas Française, pas le moins du monde ; c'est une type absolument anglais.*" She spoke fluently, but with a markedly English accent, which made Claire blush for her a little, secretly, and then reprimand herself. Her impression was that Hilary liked showing off her French ; and her own opinion was that those who talked French with an English accent ought to talk it as rarely as possible.

M. Gregoire expressed a keen desire to meet the young lady in question, not only by reason of her extraction, but also of her modernity. His manner was very suave as he said this, turned half towards the eldest of the three sisters ; and his extreme seriousness struck Claire as not perfectly genuine—as the mock sincerity which a grown person employs to a solemn child. This impression was faint and fleeting ; it returned, however, once or twice in the course of the evening when he addressed Miss Monk-Norris.

" Hilary tells me you write," Claire said tentatively, when they were in the drawing-room. He replied that this was so.

" Prose as well as poetry ? "

" Non, mademoiselle, seulement de la poésie. Et ce travail m'enivre ; c'est comme un vice secret. Le poète, c'est un fumeur d'opium : lorsque le monde l'ennuie, il s'échappe dans le pays tendre des rimes. N'est-ce pas, quand vous lisez des vers, vous sentez que le poète habite un autre monde que celui-ci—qu'il mène une autre vie, dont il veut vous faire goûter les délices ? "

" Yes," Claire answered, hesitatingly, " I think I know what you mean. . . . You certainly must meet Henrietta, she feels exactly like that. She will understand you perfectly."

" O mais ! j'espère que non ! Je n'aime pas qu'on me comprenne trop bien," the young man exclaimed with a smile. " C'est pour ça que nous sommes de si bons amis, votre sœur et moi."

Hilary once more turned and interrupted him to ask what he was saying of her.

" Je dis que nous sommes liés, vous et moi, mademoiselle, parceque vous ne me comprenez qu'à moitié, que cela vous intrigue, et que j'en suis flatté."

Hilary did, in effect, look a trifle puzzled, in her own way ; that is to say, she merely opened her eyes infinitesimally wider. Her friend, however, gave her no time to pursue the subject, for, begging Claire to pardon his egoism, he began to ask her about herself. She answered with her customary reserve, and then, with a graceful transition, he turned all his attention to his hostess.

Before he took his leave, however, Claire was able to ask him whether he was too busy to come again soon. He replied in English : " I am busy with my work, yes ; but with my distractions, no. I have very few friends in London."

" Then perhaps you would care to come to tea on

Sunday? I think I can get Miss Lincoln to come. You know Hilary will be away."

He nevertheless accepted with pleasure.

"Do you care for music? Every alternate Sunday some of our friends come and play, and Pauline sings. But this Sunday is not one of those."

"Franchement, je n'aime pas du tout la musique. Les arts sont sœurs? Oui; mais on est rarement amoureux d'une famille en masse. Et à risque de paraître impoli envers mademoiselle Pauline, je dois avouer que les chansons surtout m'irritent; je supporte mal qu'on se sert ainsi des vers divins de Verlaine ou de Heine qui ont eux-mêmes une musique exquise et délicate."

In the account which Claire subsequently gave Henrietta of that evening she purposely did not emphasise her impressions of Felix Gregoire; she wished her friend to judge him with an unprejudiced mind. Claire could not resist, however, in view of the fact that Hilary would not be present on Sunday, saying that, despite her elder sister's suggestion that the young Belgian depended on her for guidance, in her, Claire's, opinion the poet had complete control of their relations. "I think he takes Hilary with a grain of salt," she said.

"Does he chaff her?"

"Not exactly. He has a way of not smiling and not joking, and yet making you suspect that he is smiling inside. You'll see. Without that, he'd be rather pompous; but you feel that he's laughing at his own seriousness too." She went on to describe her conversation with Hilary concerning Pauline. "I meant to tell you on Tuesday, when it was fresh in my mind, but of course I couldn't as Bill and Lucy were there. She has a wonderful way of talking—fearfully grown-up; not only her manner but her words, too."

"Yes, I noticed she had a flow of language. She has rather a good vocabulary."

"I think she's too old for her age in lots of ways. I didn't feel able to stick up to her—to——"

"To cope with her?" Henrietta supplied the word.

"Yes, that's it. There seemed to be such a lot of sense in what she said about Pauline, and yet, somehow, it left out such a lot. You can't really act on theories like that, can you?"

"I suppose Hilary can. You say she called herself a woman of the world. I should think that's just about it; she is worldly. And I think the way she stares ill-bred."

Claire pondered a few moments in silence, and presently said: "Altogether she puzzles me. She has this way of talking and being fearfully all there and knowing about things; and yet I don't believe she's clever. Last night Monsieur Gregoire said that the reason he and she were such good friends was that Hilary only half understood him, and so he mystified her, and that flattered him." Henrietta looked amused, and Claire went on: "And I felt sure then he was quite right; but I thought Hilary looked as though the idea hadn't occurred to her before."

"I think," said Henrietta, "that there are hundreds of things that don't occur to her—that puzzle her—that she misses and doesn't notice. I think she's dense. Being worldly gives her blind spots about people and things. She won't be good for Pauline."

"No," Claire agreed softly.

"You'll have to put up a fight," Henrietta admonished her.

"You know I shan't do that. I'm not going to struggle with Hilary over Pauline's body——"

"*Prostrate* body." :

Claire, accustomed to her friend's interjections, paid no attention to this, and continued: "If Pauline likes being with her better than with me, I can't do anything. Besides, it may be only my imagination. There's no earthly reason really why she shouldn't go to stay with Aunt Connie, too."

"Was Pauline apologetic about crying off the concert to-day?"

"Yes, she was. It made me feel nasty—she was too apologetic."

They considered this in silence. Then Claire asked if Lucy would come on Sunday; she had not seen him properly for weeks.

"He's overworking. I'll try and bring him; he may come if he knows you're the only one at home. You're sure you want Bill?"

"Of course."

"You haven't heard any more about Clement's friend?"

Claire shook her head, and sat staring out at the houses opposite. The thoughts of Clement, as always, implied peace, the country and—at this time of year—the exquisite spring; the heavenly approach of summer—a group of visions opposed in almost everything essential, and in almost every detail to her present existence, in which Hilary and Pauline and sisterly strife played so large a part. The latter existence constituted, now, a prison; the former stood for escape. Only, the prison gate was closely barred. Once she had slipped outside, had stood in pure air among the flowering trees; but she had gone back, some would say of her own free will, into the prison-house. Her regret was none the less poignant because the prompting she had obeyed came from the recesses of her own being, her longing for freedom and peace no less persistent and strong. The plane trees beyond her own window in Westminster made, when the wind blew, a gesture of greeting and summons as though from a place—not distant, but inaccessible, of repose and energy, of silence and music, of heavenly content. They reminded her of the first evening with Clement at Sparrows—how she had asked for nothing, having so much.

"I mustn't forget," she said, "that I know what happiness is: it will be hard to remember."

CHAPTER XV

HENRIETTA AND BILL

CLAIRE spent Sunday morning alone, except for Matthew in the back drawing-room. Her father, as well as her sisters, was absent from London, and Mrs. Norris had gone to church. The house was silent ; so was the street. The church bells had ceased, and the traffic of Westminster was stilled.

She sat idle with a closed book, dreaming and thinking. There was nothing she needed, nothing she wished to do ; nowhere she wished to go. After her bitter revolt against pain, and her remorse at her own lack of action towards Clement, a deathlike resignation had settled down on her. In the midst of her remorse she had known, obscurely, that her inaction, though fatal for her, had been right : that it corresponded to some profound principle within herself ; this had been a painful consolation. But in the numb mood which followed, consolation was as absent as remorse. She found in herself no warmth, only a wintry chill of finality and loss. She had a sensation of entombment, and had neither wish nor strength to resist the process ; it was as though she had gone down, Undine-like, into the pool of her inner life, and that the surface was freezing slowly above her head.

She stirred in her chair, and was surprised to see, out of the window, the house across the court touched with sunlight. It was mid-April. She tried the information on herself, and found no response. Her only active wish, and even this was faint, was for the day to pass, for

Monday to come with the normal posts, which might bring a letter from Clement.

She glanced up at the mantelpiece, where Aunt Connie's photograph stood. The resemblance to Hilary was remarkable, in spite of the disparity of their ages, and the difference in their modes of hairdressing. Mrs. Agnew wore a sparse curled fringe on her broad, square forehead, whereas Hilary's hair sprang in a strong curve from a parting low on one side; but the eyes of the photograph, from whose borders all wrinkles had been tactfully removed by the photographer, were the eyes of Hilary Monk-Norris; the firm, high carriage of the head, the firm, rounded outline of the face, the whole unequivocal, self-confident expression, were the same.

Claire respected and even rather liked her aunt, who had been a girl of determination, an athlete when girl athletes were rare, a keen bloomer-bicyclist. She was still a great golfer; but marriage had modified her tastes, and to run her house efficiently had become an ambition quickly realised. By middle-age she was famous among her friends, relations, neighbours and acquaintances as a housewife, a maker of jam, and the possessor of superlatively fine embroidered bed-linen which branded the cheeks of those unwary enough to sleep with the monogram uppermost. Claire agreed with Henrietta's remark—made after her sole encounter with Mrs. Agnew—that it was a good thing for Aunt Connie's children that Aunt Connie hadn't got any. Her sense of duty would have forced her to put her offspring first, but they would somehow subsequently have been made to suffer for their usurpation of the place which her house occupied in her affections.

Claire wondered what Hilary would be like with her children; for she would certainly marry; anyone who valued marriage and an assured position so highly on behalf of a sister would not ignore its advantage for herself. And, Claire selfishly added, the sooner the better. She did not disguise from herself that Hilary

irked her ; her personality jarred ; she was, besides, a little hostile to Claire herself, and the fact that this hostility was unconscious—that, if accused of it, Hilary would be blankly surprised if not incredulous—far from mitigating the effect, aggravated it ; it was yet another sign of obtuseness. It has been shown that Claire was no more tolerant of other young creatures than of her elders and contemporaries, and it annoyed her that a person making such a show of culture, education, worldly wisdom and intelligence as did Hilary, should be ignorant of and apparently incurious concerning her own sentiments and characteristics. She did not connect it with a quality in her sister which might have surprised, or even provoked, admiration in a mellower critic : the quality of unself-consciousness, the lack of egotism. Hilary was complacent, perhaps conceited, probably selfish ; she had evidently no doubts as to her own excellence, but she was not an egotist ; she did not lead conversations round to herself ; when she blew her own trumpet it was briefly done. She was not only ignorant of herself, she was not especially interested. This had not struck Claire ; she found, indeed, nothing so definite—psychologically speaking—in her elder sister's favour. In fact, she disliked her. A hundred little things had contributed to her dislike ; the jar of inharmonious personalities already referred to, Hilary's patronage of Henrietta, her snobbishness concerning the Benjamins, her desire to stage-manage Pauline's existence, and, no less important, though apparently so superficial, the absence in her of half-tones and shadows ; a hardness, a tightness or density in her composition and manner, which Claire felt acutely but could not accurately define. She perceived this quality as a consistency, a surface ; it evoked an image of some bright, glazed pottery, gay but wearisome, and, in some moods of the possessor, in some lights, in some juxtapositions, crude, even repellent. As she contemplated this image, Hilary's insistent tones came back to her, unflagging like her good humour ;

and, remembering Mrs. Agnew's brusqueness, she almost wished she had gone instead of Pauline, so as to witness the meeting of aunt and niece; which pot would chip the other?

Her reverie was interrupted by Mrs. Norris's return from church. She wandered into the room in her large feathered hat and fur stole. "It's a lovely day, darling," she said, "but you don't look well. Don't you need air and exercise? Didn't you care to go to Aunt Connie's? It might have done you good."

"Well, as a matter of fact, I didn't know anything about it until Hilary and Pauline had fixed up to go."

"But Connie wrote more than a week ago, both to Hilary and me, saying she could put up two of you. Hilary's letter was enclosed in mine. . . . Oh, I believe it came one night when you were out to dinner. Hilary said she'd consult you about it."

"I don't think I'd have gone, anyway," Claire answered lightly.

"But how funny of Hilary!" Mrs. Norris went on in a puzzled voice.

"Never mind, mother dear, she must have forgotten."

This brief conversation left an unpleasant impression on Claire's mind. It was improbable that Hilary could have forgotten to mention their aunt's invitation—impartially addressed through her to Claire and Pauline—while planning with Pauline to accept it. Her reference to the matter had been quite open, and her explanation—that she had assumed Claire's unwillingness to desert her London occupations—was very likely genuine and correct; but nevertheless, the assumption involved, favouring her own desire to be accompanied by Pauline, by denying Claire the chance of expressing her wish, was more than Hilary should have taken upon herself—it showed a superfluity of self-confidence. Claire had herein just cause for annoyance; she had, however, merely been taken aback. It was her conversation with Mrs. Norris and the latter's surprise at the discovery of

Claire's negative part which put upon the incident a complexion of disingenuousness. Claire refused, however, to dwell on this quality ; if meanness there had been, it could only demean her to contemplate it. The result was that she regarded her adopted sister with a very slight feeling of discomfort, too slight to be called distrust ; and which was not dispelled by Hilary's consistent bright openness of manner. Indeed, that manner had now taken on for Claire a faintly, and almost imperceptibly, sinister tinge. During the ensuing week sometimes she found herself on the verge of dreading Hilary's return.

The Lincolns and Bill Osler arrived all together soon after lunch. They had that morning been to the park, and Henrietta was full of the spring clothes she had seen on the promenaders.

" Oh, *why* aren't I one of the smart intelligeners ? " she cried on entering the room. " Mrs. Norris, don't you think I should make a first-class Soul ? The young Souls do have such sport. They mix pearls and poetry, and they appreciate both, so they can't be quite swine. "

" Most poets don't care for dress—at least the ones I knew when I was a girl didn't, " Mrs. Norris answered, smiling vaguely into her past. " But then poetry is the fashion now, isn't it ? "

" O Lord, yes ! The Guards fairly reek of it. If *only* my papa were the Prime Minister ! "

Mrs. Norris began to hum.

" Yes, I know, " said Henrietta, " but the Prince of Wales won't do in that respect now. Prime Ministers' daughters have a far royaller time than princesses. Oh, Lucy, why aren't you the eldest son of an earl ? "

" Calm yourself, what ? " said Bill. " Look here, Claire, come and dine with us at the Carlton to-morrow and pretend to be one of the upper ten, will you ? I have to catch the seven o'clock leave train on Tuesday morning, and I'm going to make a night of it. "

" You and Lucy and I are to be the first—or respectable

—instalment,” Henrietta explained. “We’ll go to a show, press a kiss on Bill’s noble—or is it fevered?—brow, and go home to bed while he continues alone in London.”

“Exactly,” Bill agreed calmly. “You really are a womanly woman after all, Henrietta. Where’s this here Belgee, Claire?”

“He’s coming. I must tell you, he hates music.”

“Well, I’ll try and prevent Bill singing ‘Songs of the Hebrides,’ said Henrietta.

Mrs. Norris now excused herself and left the room.

Lucy lay in a deep chair staring out of the window. Presently he said softly: “‘O God! O Montreal!’”

“Is London being worse than usual?” Claire asked him.

He turned dazzled eyes on her and answered: “No, I like London, you know—if one hadn’t to work so many hours, and if one could get away oftener.”

“How would you like to live?” she questioned with sudden curiosity.

“I’d like to live in the country—the real country, not less than two hours from London, and where there are no Londoners. Preferably on chalk. I should eat a lot and go for long walks, and have some one to play to me sometimes in the evenings.”

“And nice furniture and linen and Georgian silver,” his sister added, “and tip-top wine and good cigars and large fires.”

“All alone?”

“Oh, I wouldn’t mind Henrietta,” the young man answered with the ghost of a smile.

“And—I forgot,” his sister retorted. “You’d want three different botany books of three volumes each, with plates and diagrams and coloured illustrations. An encyclopedia, and *The Egoist* and Hardy’s poems; and then a few Arnold Bennetts for lighter moments.”

“And you?” Claire turned to Bill.

"Me? O good Lord, I haven't thought. I liked my life before the war. In fact I like it now. I prefer plenty of hot water——"

"Oh, so does Lucy. The luxuries go without saying," Miss Lincoln interrupted.

"And an endless supply of clean brushes——"

"Paint—or hair?"

"Paint. And friends in to see me every night—nice noisy friends—and—I can't think of any more."

"You lack a sister to fill in the gaps," said Claire, without thinking; and, the instant she had said it, was aware of the significance which, in the silence, her remark assumed. What seemed to her a silence was really only the briefest of pauses; almost on top of her words the door opened, and M. Gregoire was announced.

"Mr. Lincoln and Mr. Osler have just described their ideal existences," she told the new-comer.

"I wish that I had heard," he answered. "Am I to hear yours, mademoiselle?"

"No; I couldn't describe mine; it's too vague."

"Everybody knows mine!" said Henrietta. "Distraction, gaiety, clothes, dances, books, poetry, plays, music; most of all, people."

"La vie mondaine?"

"Oui, la vie mondaine."

"Pourtant, mademoiselle ne se contenterait pas de cela; à la fin, elle s'ennuierait."

"Mais non. Pourvu que le trou soit rempli."

"What do you mean?" Claire asked.

Henrietta looked for a moment as though she had been trapped into an avowal; she carried it off gaily, however. "There's an insatiable hole in me for pleasure," she answered. "You know that, Claire."

"Vous êtes donc une Pierrette?" said Felix Gregoire. "Vous avez plutôt l'air d'un harlequin transformé en jeune fille."

"She has, rather," Bill agreed, forgetting to pretend that he only understood English.

"Lucy is Pierrot, then," said Henrietta, "melancholy Pierrot. Bill, you are the yokel hanging his jaw at the show. Claire, I don't know *what* you are."

"Mademoiselle Claire-de-lune," the young Belgian murmured, but so gently that all impertinence was lacking from the title, and he and Henrietta began simultaneously to recite :

"Votre âme est un paysage choisi
Que vont charmant masques et bergamasques
Jouant du luth et dansant et quasi
Tristes sous——"

"*Non*," Henrietta interrupted herself and Felix Gregoire. "Elle n'est ni déguisée, ni fantasque ; jamais de la vie."

"Toute physionomie est masque," the young poet said, with mock sententiousness, as though quoting ; "mais si nous allons vraiment trouver le mot juste pour Mademoiselle Norris, c'est—n'est-ce-pas ?—Mademoiselle Crépuscule."

"Yes ! Yes !" cried Henrietta delightedly. "That's it. When the sky is *grey*, not blue, and the moon is lemon-yellow, not bright and shining. That's exactly like her."

"Have you brought any of your poems with you ?" said Claire, becoming a little restive under the continued scrutiny of her companions and the extremely personal turn of the talk.

M. Gregoire replied that he had been wanting in courage. Claire told him that Miss Lincoln also wrote poems.

"Not now," that young lady corrected her. "I haven't written a line of poetry since 'Ring o' Roses.' I've begun a novel now," she went on, turning to M. Gregoire, "only the characters all dislike each other so much that they won't get on with the action. It is called 'Having it Both Ways.'"

"There's a book called *Cake* that I came across once which had the same theme," said Bill Osler.

"Which was 'Ring o' Roses'?" Claire asked her friend. "I can't remember it."

"The one about the sea-bathers making a ring all round England, Scotland and Wales."

"Tiens, c'est de l'Unanimisme," remarked the other poet. "Sans doute vous connaissez Vildrac et Duhamel?"

Henrietta replied that she did, and that, while bored by the latter, she thought the former equal to Verhaeren. The young Belgian tried to draw Claire into the discussion, but she had read no French poetry except *Les Multiples Splendeurs*, which Leonard Benjamin had lent her.

"Vous l'aimez?"

She told him yes.

"Alors, je vais vous prêter *Les Forces Tumulueuses* et *Les Villes Tentaculaires*. Vous verrez que c'est du Vildrac, mais plus puissant, plus grand, plus pénétrant."

"'Et pénétrant comme l'écho,'" quoted Henrietta.

The young man went on, still addressing Claire: "Alors vous avez le goût de la poésie? Votre sœur ne l'a absolument pas. Cela ne lui dit rien du tout."

"Who, Pauline? That's quite true," Claire agreed quickly.

"Non, non. C'est de votre sœur Hilary que je parle."

There was a silence. Hilary's utter indifference to poetry seemed to oppress all the inmates of the room; for a few minutes her personality dominated theirs. Claire, with her lurking fear of disloyalty, felt uncomfortable; but the young man's tone had been perfectly kind and uncritical; he had simply announced a fact interesting and curious to him. He presently began to discuss life in the trenches with Bill Osler.

The three others sat mutely listening. To Claire, all first-hand information of the war was horribly enthralling—anything which counteracted the mass of misrepresentation, sentimentality, cant and picturesque detail supplied by the newspapers, "war books," and current stories.

"By Jove, I was scared that time!" said Bill. "I used to go out reconnoitring with my batman at night. He'd come crawling along after me, and every now and then touch my foot to show he was still there. Of course, when the Verey lights went up we froze. One night we got up on the edge of a crater, and suddenly a light went up and there was a Fritz bang opposite me a few yards off; he was reconnoitring too! I was scared out of my life."

Felix Gregoire had also been excessively frightened on various occasions; he and Bill seemed to grudge each other the palm for fearfulness.

"Really, you two!" Henrietta cried at last. "You're not being at all what England expects. You disappoint me, sure." At which both the young men grinned with gentle amusement at her thin face with its sardonic mouth and pale frame of hair.

Before going out on Monday evening Claire received a letter from Clement. In it he told her that Margesson had died of his wounds. The letter had been written literally on the eve of an expected battle, of which the young man spoke almost with exultation. He was longing for action of some kind; his feelings concerning his friend's death needed an outlet. He added, in a scrawled postscript, that Margesson had left him all his money; but he made no comment.

Claire told Bill about Margesson's death when she met him and the Lincolns at the Carlton.

"Poor Parsons!" said Osler. "I'm afraid he must be fearfully cut up. They seem to be having it hot. I'm glad I'm going back."

Claire glanced across at Henrietta who, like Beauty in Rupert Brooke's "Funeral of Youth," was "pale in her black, dry-eyed." After drinking a little wine, however, her cheeks became flushed and she began to talk in her normal way, constructing histories about the other diners. Claire made great efforts to respond, but her

anxiety about Clement, seldom dormant, was now abnormally active. Already he might be fatally wounded, maimed, blinded, or dead. Lucy, whose habit was to allow others to make conversational overtures, roused himself on this occasion and began to talk to her about a revue he had seen, a book he had read, a song he had heard soldiers sing as they marched through the streets. She was grateful to him for his efforts; she knew his difficulty in talking even to friends with whom he was not shy; the day's work used all his strength and vitality. He, too, however, began to respond to the wine; his eyes shone behind their glasses, and every now and then he let out a modified guffaw at Bill's and Henrietta's rival jests. At one point the latter, quoting Claire with a smile at her, said: "Why are we here at all?"

"Why, indeed!" her brother echoed.

"Oh, lots of things to do," said Bill cheerfully; but, in spite of their tones, a wave of seriousness had passed over them; the light died out of the Lincolns' faces; Lucy, as he put down his glass, made a very slight unconscious grimace, and said after a pause: "There's a damn sight too much to do."

"If it's worth doing," his sister answered. "It's certainly not worth while to swot one's eyes out all day in an office."

"No," Lucy agreed judiciously, looking at his plate.

"Some chaps have work they like—me, for instance," Bill pointed out.

"And there are holidays in the country," said Claire, "and music and nice people——"

"And, of first importance, food," Henrietta interrupted.

"You vile materialist, you unutterably gloomy pessimist, you chastening cynic, what?" said Bill, staring across at the last speaker. Then, turning to Claire, he went on: "Has she informed you that I've proposed marriage to her?"

"Oh, *Bill*," Henrietta cried, "I wanted to tell Claire!

I was going to tell her in the lady's room, only there wasn't time. You *are* a selfish pig."

"Well, you can tell 'em whether you've accepted me or not."

Claire raised her glass, and Lucy followed suit.

"What does one say?" she asked nobody in particular, smiling.

"Say your heart is too full."

"Say marriage is a lottery."

"Say that you thought she was wedded to the muse——"

"Wedded to the blues, you mean——"

"But don't say you expected it. It is not good form to tell home truths when dining out."

"Our standard of wit is lower than usual this evening."

Eventually Lucy and Claire succeeded in drinking the health of the engaged couple. Claire's spirits had risen immediately on hearing the news. Her wish was to see her friend alone and have an opportunity of showing the warm, keen joy she felt, which raised her heart like wine. It was indeed a great enough joy to swamp for the evening her anxiety about Clement. When the girls went to get their cloaks she clasped her hand round Henrietta's arm and said, "Darling, what a pity you can't be married at once."

"Yes, isn't it rotten? Bill was an idiot not to ask me sooner. I could slap him. You see, I knew if I asked him he'd refuse. He's disgustingly nohow-contrary-wise. It only happened to-day. He's going to try and get special leave in June."

"Henrietta, I am so pleased. He's a dear, though of course not a patch on you. Thank goodness you're happy."

"Oh, Claire!" her companion sighed, "if only you could be happy too."

Of Bill's imminent danger they did not speak.

During one of the intervals of the revue to which they went, Bill and Lucy left their seats, and Claire, turning

to her friend, said in a low voice, "Tell me about it."

Henrietta related in a whisper: "I thought, perhaps, that Bill was a little keen on me before he went to the front, and I just liked it. It's perfectly topping to be admired—it makes you feel much cleverer and better-looking, and as if you could do anything. Then I began to be sorry, because I didn't think *I* was going to be keen on him. Yet I was sure in my bones that if he made love to me it would be all right. Then he came on leave; and as he did and said nothing more than usual, I decided I'd been a damn fool, and imagined the whole thing, and I was rather dim. Well, last Thursday, before your dinner-party, he was at the flat with me, and, as it was getting late, I told him he'd better buzz off to the studio to dress. He looked most fearfully fed up, and I couldn't make it out. He said, 'Henrietta, you beast, don't you mind a bit what I feel like?' Well, Claire—was I an idiot?—I didn't know how to take it; I asked him what I'd done, and he said, 'Why did I go on like that?' I said, 'My dear old idiot, like what?' and he stumped off, scowling. I felt rotten. Then, on the Friday he said nothing; I had the absolute jim-jams. On Saturday, he suddenly asked me, 'Are we as we were, or not?' I said I didn't know what he was driving at. So then he told me—and about time too. All that part's queer and indistinct in my memory. He'd been thinking for a long time we might get married, and he'd thought I liked him until the Thursday, when he got a nasty doubt."

"Which you did not dispel?" said Claire.

"Well, I couldn't very well assume he was proposing to me, could I? The evidence was insufficient. Men really are extraordinary the way they expect to have it both ways. They want to do the proposing, but, on the other hand, they want the woman to show them quite clearly just whether it's worth their while to propose or not. Damn it! You can't cling to a man till you're sure he wants you to cling."

“ So that was that.”

“ Oh, no, it wasn't. Far from it. Of course I was fearfully happy about his wanting me ; but he was so calm over it all. It was this pestiferous reserved Anglo-Saxon touch of his. And I couldn't say to him, ‘ Bill, for Heaven's sake kiss me,’ which was what I wanted. I don't mean to say I lacked the nerve to say it, or to kiss *him*, but that wouldn't do. It had to be him. I mean I wouldn't feel right till then. Well, I hadn't committed myself, and on Saturday we were no forrader. However, on Saturday afternoon he became decently Celtic, or Hibernian, or whatever it is. Then we began to discuss the first stages of our affair ; and, my dear, when it dawned on him that I hadn't been sure, at the beginning of his leave, that I loved him, he got the wind up most fearfully.”

“ What do you mean ? Be quick, they'll be back soon. Talk softly, that old hag's listening,” said Claire.

“ He called me his dearest child, and said I was being carried away by my passions ! Did you ever hear such rot ? I tried to explain, but he was quite different. So I agreed to everything he said. He said I must think it over and not hurry, and let him know by letter after he'd left. I felt deathly that night. So I wrote him a letter beseeching him to be engaged to me ; and this evening, after we'd been to your house, I gave it to him ; and he allowed himself to be persuaded that I really did care.”

At this point they perceived the young men returning, and Henrietta ceased her narrative. Her new transforming happiness told Claire all that she had omitted.

CHAPTER XVI

RETURN

PAULINE returned on Tuesday in time for lunch. She possessed an added grace and freshness acquired from the country airs, and brought into the house at Westminster a sense of hyacinths standing in pools of sunlight and the pale green diapered pattern of young ivy leaves under the curved bramble sprays at a wood's edge. Curiously enough, the effect of her brief stay out of London was to accentuate her poise and delicacy rather than to flush and rusticate her with sunburn and exercise. A faint likeness to Claire, which at ordinary times consisted only in the formation of her brows and eyelids and temples, was to-day increased; her eyes had a quietude, her gestures an economy, which one might more readily have attributed to the repressive influence of town. The close pattern of ivy creeping through the grass has a kinship with the moulding of Georgian houses and the exquisite small balanced designs of Wedgwood plaques. Pauline seemed to-day to make this kinship manifest. Her eyes, often merely blue-grey, were to-day, perhaps by some accident of reflection, the blue verging on violet of wild hyacinths.

The lunch bell had rung, and Tom Norris and Claire were just rising from their joint labours in the library, when the door opened and she came buoyantly in, dressed in the tweeds that had provoked Henrietta's admiration and mockery the autumn before, and a hat of fine straw, plain save for three tiny blue jay's feathers stuck in the ribbon.

"Lunch," she said, in her clear but not boisterous

tones. "Come on, father, I have a true golfer's appetite."

"That's right," Tom Norris answered, regarding her over his spectacles with evident satisfaction. "Has Hilary come back, too?" He had already been informed of the probable length of her absence, but it was his un-failing custom to ask after his family.

"No. She's coming on Thursday or Friday. Aunt Connie sent her love to every one. She hopes you're going to stay with her soon, Claire."

They went in to lunch, and Claire told her sister of Henrietta's engagement to Bill Osler. Pauline did not say much, but, when the meal was over, and their parents had left the dining-room, she lingered with her sister. It was Pauline's custom, if her thoughts were busy, to walk smoking up and down the long room. Claire still sat at the table, half turned towards the window.

"What was it like at Aunt Connie's?" she asked.

"It was rather like a household economy school. In the morning we made the beds—you know they do on two servants now, and a boy. Then we cleaned the silver, or, rather, two of us did that while the other dusted the drawing-room knick-knacks. Then we gardened, or pretended to garden. I pretended. After lunch, golf with Uncle Frank. After tea, golf or walk. After dinner, whist or piquet, or, specially to please Hilary and me, auction. On Sunday there was a tea-fight; I suppose to test Hilary's social sense."

"How did she stand it?"

"Oh, very well. So did I. It'll be your turn next."

"Aunt Connie has decided already that I've none. I can't make tea-parties 'go.'"

"I always wish they'd 'go' sooner than they do. However, it was quite fun. And at night Hilary and I used to jaw. We shared the big spare bedroom."

Claire breathed a silent prayer of gratitude to whatever deity had prevented her from going on this visit.

"You liked that?" she presently said, tentatively and

yet deliberately. She had an intuition of a change in Pauline, a change of attitude, somehow brought about during her absence, and she wished to substantiate this impression.

Pauline looked for two seconds faintly embarrassed. She then replied: "Yes. We got an awfully well." There was a certain reserve in her tone, and while she continued to perambulate, her sister continued to look at her. Without returning this gaze Pauline suddenly went on, in an altered voice, one of frank admission: "You know, Claddie, Hilary's an awfully good sort—and awfully interesting, too. She *tells* one things. I feel positively as if I've grown an inch during the week-end, from experience—you know—second-hand."

"Vicarious," Claire supplied.

"That's it: vicarious experience. After all, it is interesting to have a sister whose been to India and Greece and Russia, as well as Belgium, and ordinary places like that."

"Of course it is," Claire agreed, while her thoughts ran like lightning: "Why are people always apologising to me?—first Clement and now Pauline. What's wrong with me?"

"And not only that, but she talks to one—about her own experiences, and the people who've wanted to marry her and so on. Do you remember you said she had a grip on things? I feel as though she mattered—her opinions—what she thinks of other people, and of oneself."

There was silence: Claire had nothing to say. She had only a sense of fulfilment and of impotence. She knew that she had no gifts like Hilary's with which to ensure Pauline's admiration. She could only open her arms, and willingly, though sadly, let her go.

Pauline went on pacing; and although her next speech was not a direct answer to the silence, her sister knew that she had perceived it. "I think Hilary knows who's who, and what's what better than we do.

We only know a narrow set of people—Bayswater—and of course, the Lincolns. We don't even know the Lincolns' friends, the people Henrietta calls Bloomsburies and Chelseas. Our—circle is very—narrow, isn't it, and——”

“ Limited,” Claire suggested.

Pauline accepted this gratefully. Claire had, during her speech, an impression that she was repeating an only half-mastered lesson ; or that she was trying to express her thoughts in a new language. It was all so unlike Pauline—the least analytic of persons, the least prone to psychological curiosity.

“ Not that I have a great desire to know Bloomsburies and Chelseas,” she went on more cheerfully, “ but it all——” she hesitated again, and frowned as she paced and blew smoke——“ it strikes me that life might be more exciting with all the people who live in London.”

“ We are at war, you know,” her sister pointed out.

“ Oh, you don't understand,” said Pauline impatiently, “ the war has nothing to do with it. If there was peace we'd be just the same, mugging along with Stokes's and Benjamins. After all, we aren't dull or stupid or ugly, are we ? ”

“ No, I suppose we're fairly amusing.”

“ I wonder what you *do* think about us ? ” the new Pauline exclaimed, stopping and facing her sister across the dining-table. “ Now, I know what father thinks ; he thinks we're wonders of beauty and talent, and mother's like you. Now Hilary knows what she thinks and says so. And she has rather a high standard.”

“ So that if you came up to it you feel you must be rather splendid ? ” Claire half asked, half stated, “ and naturally, you feel flattered ? ” She was perfectly serious.

Pauline, still standing opposite, drew in some smoke, but her eyes looked inclined to smile, Claire thought. The latter must, however, have been mistaken, for the answer came a trifle defiantly : “ Yes. You yourself

said that Hilary had a grasp of things ; isn't that rather splendid ? ”

“ Yes, I think perhaps it is,” Claire answered slowly.

“ O Claddie ! ” Pauline cried, half laughing, half irritated, “ there you go ! ‘ Yes, perhaps it is,’ ‘ Yes, I suppose so ’ ! O dear ! you are so careful and cautious. Henrietta may try till all's blue to turn you into an anarchist ; she never will. Why are you like that ? In all these months you've never said anything one could catch hold of—about yourself or anyone else. You never even told me about Henrietta and Bill, though you must have known beforehand. You are really too reserved for words.” She still stood contemplating her sister, and then, turning, walked to the window and stood humming under her breath. Poor Millie's *Work* surveyed them in the ensuing silence. Claire's eyes wandered over its familiar tones and values ; she envied those personages who lived in a world narrower and more limited even than the society of Bayswater, quieter than the Westminster street, and where the mysteries of human motive, the complications of human conduct were absent, and the inhabitants indissolubly united.

She sat in a stillness that was not stunned, and which yet lacked emotion. Her intellect recognised the truth of Pauline's indictment ; she confronted the image of herself thus presented and saw that it was just. The accusations levelled at her were the same as Clement had made, fragmentarily and in jest. She was indeed careful and cautious ; she had not, in the sense that Pauline meant, made a friend of her ; she had been reserved. To reply that she could not discuss Henrietta's affairs with some one who disliked Henrietta would be to beg the question. In reality she had no defence, or, at least, none that she could put forward or that her sister would comprehend. Only the latter's obvious embarrassment, humming at the window, forced Claire to speak.

“ I told you about Ivor Webb,” she said, and smiled at the feebleness of her belated retort.

Pauline moved from the window. "Oh, yes. Of course I was ridiculous to talk like that just now. You've been a brick to me. I told Hilary how ripping you'd been."

Claire winced.

" . . . And the way you've practised those wretched accompaniments . . . "

"Which," Claire said to herself, "Hilary can play quite adequately at first sight."

"Don't think I want to be a beast, Claire," Pauline pursued. "I know you can't help being reserved. In fact, I expect it's a very good thing to be. I must say I loathe girls who go round telling everybody they've had a proposal."

"The fact of the matter is," her sister answered, smiling a little, "that I've never had a proposal of marriage to confide." As she spoke, she thought with unusual cynicism that the picture of her as a little nursery governess or, in Hilary's revised version, an urban Brontë, might as well be complete—as much of an artistic whole as possible.

The other turned and smiled too, frankly and friendly, as she said: "Now I come to think of it, I don't believe you have. . . . Well, I must buzz off. I'm due at the Benjamins' for tea, and I must change first. Take Thomas if you go out with Matthew."

She vanished, and Claire stayed for a time pondering the influence, deliberate or unconscious, which had so modified her younger sister's attitude to herself, and her outlook on life. She had quickly perceived that Hilary was unavowedly hostile to herself, openly hostile to the Benjamins and Pauline's preoccupation with music. Claire had always known that Pauline was adaptable; but the ease and speed with which she had responded to a new and contrary influence was surprising . . . no, perhaps not surprising, in view of Hilary's strong personality, and the glamour which clings to the returned traveller. Claire had, however, such confidence in her

junior's essential kindness and sense of proportion that she regarded her contact with a hard and worldly nature not so much as a disaster to Pauline, as an indescribable triumph for Hilary, or trial for herself. Pauline would not be permanently spoilt by Hilary's flattery or ambition; her own straightforward, clear, humorous nature would reassert itself; the chief danger would lie in the artificial reinforcement of her natural selfishness.

As Claire came downstairs a short while later, dressed for exercising the dogs, Alice opened the front door to a telegraph boy. Mrs. Norris was lying down with a headache, so the girl tore the envelope with trembling hands and read:

"Arrived to-day. Hospital Park Square. Wound in leg not serious.—CLEMENT PARSONS."

She put out a hand blindly to the banisters, and said: "No answer." Her heart closed on the tidings; she had no sensations save that of enclosing them.

Turning, she ran upstairs to Pauline's door and tapped.

"Come in," her sister called.

"Pauline—Clement is wounded. I'm going to Park Square to see him. Tell mother before you go out." Without waiting for a reply she went swiftly down and out of the house.

Fortunately, a taxi was passing down Buckingham Gate; very soon, and yet after an exceedingly long time, she was across the Park, and descended before a large house of which the door stood open. An orderly in a white coat answered her ring, and led her upstairs. She had a glimpse of officers in khaki standing in the large hall. Everywhere was a smell of disinfectant. On the first floor a solemn-looking nurse met her, and told her that Mr. Parsons was rather tired out by his journey; but after a long look at the girl she added: "You could see him just for a moment," and opened a door.

Claire found herself in a very long, bright, simply-distempered room, running to right and left of the door, apparently the whole length of the house. Under the

six windows was a row of beds, and under the two other windows at one end. There were white screens here and there, and huge vases of flowers. Several visitors sat by prostrate friends, and there was a cheerful, subdued sound of talk. A young man in a khaki dressing-gown, sitting up in a chair, was winding a gramophone, which presently began to sing in the voices of Elsie Janis and Basil Hallam. Claire went slowly down the room, disconcerted at intervals by the unexpected position of a bed not placed parallel with the rest. She saw no form that she recognised. A nurse suddenly appeared from nowhere, spoke to her and directed her to a far corner. She retraced her steps, keeping her eyes before her from a sort of modesty: these men were, or had lately been, in pain; they had struggled in hell, and no stillness and peace, comfort and security, flowers and sunlight, could ever quite atone. She felt herself responsible—as is every inhabitant of every land at war—for their suffering and loss of limbs and health, their horrible memories and intolerable nightmares; and her responsibility combined with her immunity made her ashamed.

She saw Clement lying in bed against the wall opposite the windows, a screen shading his head. His eyes were closed in his pale face. She sat down quietly and waited. Presently, he stirred, opened his eyes, and turned his head her way.

“ Claire,” he said without surprise.

She leaned forward and took his hand.

“ I’m back soon,” he said with an embryonic smile.

“ How is your leg? How do you feel? ” Claire asked gently.

“ It’s not very bad. But I shall probably be lame. Wasn’t I lucky to get a blighty? ”

She nodded, trying to smile, and, loosening her grasp, sat back.

“ You came sooner than I expected,” he went on.

“ Why, as soon as I got the wire, of course. Have

you been in hospital in France? They didn't let us know."

"No, I got hit on Sunday afternoon. They took me to a field dressing-station. I started back on Monday. Do you know, I haven't been out there a fortnight. Isn't it absurd?"

"You got out on the ninth, didn't you?"

"Yes. . . . It took less than that to do poor Margesson in."

His voice had grown weak. He lay now staring at the ceiling, while Claire sat staring at him. She could scarcely believe that it was he, so short a while was it since she had bid him good-bye. Yet the time had not seemed short. His return seemed too good to be true, yet her heart was strangely empty of joy; she only felt an immense tenderness and pity, a passionate wish to heal him, to make all smooth for him, to give him his heart's desire; and a simultaneous longing to kneel by the bed, to lay her forehead in his slack hand, and to stay so, understanding and understood for unheeded hours.

At last she said: "I think I ought to go. The nurse only let me in just to say 'Hullo!' and then come away. I'll come to-morrow and stay longer, if you aren't feeling bad. Do you want something to read?"

"I shall soon. Whatever you think. Thanks awfully. Must you go? Give my love to Mrs. Norris and Pauline. I hope they'll come and see me."

"Of course they will."

"And I want to see Hilary."

As they shook hands, Claire remembered their last grip, he at the carriage window, she on the platform—her hour of agony. Tears suddenly stung her eyelids, and she turned quickly away; but they were not merely tears of self-pity. The whole atmosphere and appearance of the hospital from the moment of her entrance had been working on her nerves; the calm and light, the flowers and talk, no less than the odour of medicaments and the bandaged heads, contributed to the effect of tragedy.

As she passed out of the room, the voice of Miss Lee White, pleasantly husky, was remarking :

“ Every little while I feel so lonely.”

Claire walked quickly to Marble Arch and took a bus to Piccadilly ; she then walked up to Solomon's. The large window was beautifully arranged with flowers and fruits ; in the left-hand window a pyramid of flushed hot-house peaches and jade-coloured and purple grapes stood in the middle in a gilded basket. There were boxes of blood-oranges from Palermo ; green Australian apples in wicker trays ; small Canary bananas ; and baskets of forced strawberries. In the right-hand window, in a high green vase stood branches of white lilac, pure and yet exotic ; drooping cream-coloured freezias, strong daffodils, pheasant-eye narcissi, and stalwart little yellow jonquils, anemones from Italy, wine-red and purple ; dark English and pale Parma violets ; bunches of perfect half-opened roses—Madame Chatenay's silvery shell-pink, Hugh Dickson's rich crimson, Killarney's white ; and, in low pots, delicate Roman and fat pink and Wedgwood-blue and indigo hyacinths. Claire stood in fascinated contemplation ; there was something royal, triumphant, superb in the flawlessness of these blooms—a perfection never attained by human loveliness ; comparable only to the perfection of gems in the finest settings and strings of the rarest pearls.

She entered the shop, warm and heavily perfumed, and ordered some grapes to be sent to Clement that day. Then she hesitated ; should she wait and take flowers to-morrow ? No, he would like some to-night ; he would feel less cut off from his friends. The shopman made a gesture towards the red roses, but she turned away ; the remembrance of Clement's gift last autumn, and her coincident realisation of his impulse towards Pauline, was too vivid. She chose a bundle of daffodils with deep golden trumpets and pale outer petals, and a large bunch of sweet, sombre Devonshire violets.

When she got home, her father met her in the hall

"So the boy's back!" he said. "Is he badly wounded?"

"He says not; but it must be pretty bad as he thinks he'll be lame."

Tom Norris shook his head. "They're sad days, Claddie," he said. Claire began to mount the stairs.

"That letter you drafted to Montgomery will do very well," he went on.

"I'm glad, father. Is mother still lying down?"

"Yes. I've sent for Blagden. She thinks she's got—er—something. You'd better not go in till we hear what it is."

Claire, however, ignored this injunction and looked softly in at Mrs. Norris's door. The latter was asleep, so she crept out again and went upstairs.

Her own room was full of pale afternoon light from the north-west, which turned her creamy bedspread and the broad mounts of her photographs in their thin narrow ebony frames into wan expanses of white. She took off her hat, and then her shoes, and sat, in the rather helpless condition to which shoelessness reduces one, considering what a great deal had happened in the past two hours. The news and then the sight of Clement, stood out as the supreme event, flanked on either side by the lesser occurrences; the conversation with Pauline and its purport; and their mother's indisposition. Of the two, the former, being an abstract contingency, necessarily held, for a person of Claire's temperament and character, the place of first importance; the situation which it signalled might very likely have a great and lasting influence on the relation of the sisters; Pauline's new allegiance was not a development whose significance Claire would or could minimise. On the other hand, illness in the Norris family was so rare as to be rather alarming; with all Claire's and her mother's delicate look, they had scarcely ever needed to be under a doctor's care, and Pauline's health was proverbial. For Mrs.

Norris to have expressed the opinion that she "had something" meant that she was feeling extremely unwell; it occurred to Claire that she ought to urge her mother to go to bed. She had no fear of disease for herself, but an almost superstitious fear of it for others. She rose presently, and put on her shoes.

Her thoughts returned inevitably to the other prostrate figure, a few miles off, and to be visited again on the morrow. She had promised to take him books: which? She glanced at the shelf where stood her recent purchases and the books borrowed from, or rather pressed on her, by Henrietta Lincoln and Leonard Benjamin. She felt at liberty, however, to pass on Henrietta's loans to Clement. She would take him the *Story of Gösta Berling* and Conrad's *Youth* for romance; Bell's *Art* for his more serious moments; *Trivia* and *Peacock Pie* for moments of idleness and dream. An ironical echo of the last title caught her eyes, and she added to her mental list Lawrence's *White Peacock*, to balance romance with realism.

There was a tap at her door, and her father's voice called her. She started almost guiltily, realising how her thoughts had carried her far from her mother. She went quickly and opened. It was almost unprecedented for Tom Norris to climb so high in his own house; he must be much disturbed to have done so; indeed, distress showed in his round pink face and round blue eyes. "I've persuaded your mother to go to bed," he said hesitatingly. "She's very hot and cold. Dr. Blagden hasn't come yet. Have you a thermometer?"

"No."

"She asked for a thermometer. There isn't one in the house." He looked his dismay at being unable to satisfy his wife's least wish.

"Dr. Blagden will bring one," said Claire reassuringly. "I'll go and help her to get to bed."

"That's a good girl," her father replied, forgetting

his recent prohibition. "Ellen is with her, but what good are these servants?"

He turned, and the girl followed him down.

"I'm going to the stores to get her some grapes," he said; and Claire wondered suddenly what had made her go so determinedly to Solomon's that afternoon: the working of her own and other people's minds struck her as a mysterious business. She suddenly saw her own and other people's mental processes as a tangled jungle, an unexplored hinterland, a forest tract, a region of secrets and surprises, a veritable heart of darkness.

CHAPTER XVII

THE FRUIT RIPENS

HILARY sat at the bureau in the back drawing-room of the house in Westminster, dealing with some letters which she had allowed to accumulate during the past few days. She had returned on Thursday afternoon to find Mrs. Norris and Claire in bed with influenza. When Alice informed her of this, Hilary stood still in the hall, as though considering a project ; it did, in fact, occur to her to return to Mrs. Agnew's, but on second thoughts she walked resolutely into the library.

Tom Norris was sitting at his writing-table, before a confusion of papers. He looked up, as she entered, with a rather lost and puzzled expression. As she kissed him he said : " Had a good time, eh ? "

" Splendid, thanks, Daddy." Hilary was the only one of his daughters who had retained the childish title, eschewed by Claire several years ago, and by Pauline when she attained womanhood. " I hear that mother and Claire have 'flu. What a nuisance for them ! What are their temperatures ? "

" Your mother's is down a bit to-day, below normal. Claddie's is still up—hundred and one, I think Dr. Blagden said."

" I suppose he's giving them aconite or aspirin ? "

Her father gave her a suddenly shrewd look. " You'll be able to ask him when he comes this evening," he said. " Claddie's asleep. I went up just now to ask—to see her, and she was dozing."

" That's a good thing. She'd better be left. Where's Pauline ? "

"She's gone to see Clement Parsons."

"Oh! He's on leave, is he?"

"No, he's in hospital, wounded."

"Really! That's very quick work, surely?"

"It doesn't take long to get wounded," her father had replied.

It was now Monday. Mrs. Norris, whose attack had been the milder, was sitting up by a fire in her room, while her husband read her portions of *The Times*. This was an act almost without precedent; at ordinary times he correctly assumed that her interest in politics was very slight, and her interest in the war spasmodic and confined to picturesque details. His present attention was directed less towards her entertainment than as a sort of tribute to that mysterious goddess, Disease—the respectful homage of a man to something beyond his ken.

Claire had not yet risen from her bed. She lay idle for long periods, sometimes dreaming, sometimes with an almost blank mind, and occasionally read a little. Matthew, who slept at night on her fur bed rug, was allowed to spend part of the day curled heavily upon her feet. He seldom deserted her. Pauline looked in at odd moments, to give her news of Clement and her mother, to bring her the *Tatler* and *Vogue*, or a piece of gossip, to smile delightfully and vanish. Her father came less often, either dutifully—for he felt uneasy in a sick-room, and in the presence of a strange, still flushed or pallid Claire—or apologetically to ask her help over some difficulty due to his incomplete mastery of her filing system, or a hiatus in his memory. Regularly once a day Hilary entered, reminded her to take her medicine, straightened her sheets, shook up her pillows with a practised hand, and asked her what she was inclined to eat. She was calm and business-like; but her economy of words and brevity of sojourn told Claire plainly what she already knew—that Hilary cared little for her company.

Instead of leaving her indifferent, this daily reminder

that her own slight aversion to Hilary was reciprocated displeased her. Hours of pondering showed her that she was still open to conquest by her elder sister, still sensitive to her opinion; that she had a small, secret, ashamed desire for Hilary's approval, if not for her affection. She understood well why Pauline set store by Hilary's consideration; she herself coveted it, while all the time feeling an antipathy, as to an unshaded light, an insistent noise—while all the time criticising Hilary's complacency and density, her apparent indifference to subtlety, nobility and abstract beauty. They were as uncongenial and divided as an Oriental and a European, and yet Claire found herself hoping for a *rapprochement*, looking for a hint of understanding, and was each day a little disappointed.

She tried to describe this frame of mind to Henrietta. Henrietta was, with Matthew, her most constant companion; she came every morning, and yesterday had stayed for lunch and the afternoon as well, reading aloud, desultorily talking of her and Bill's plans, or sitting silent in a deep chair while Claire rested.

"I looked into the larder as I came up," she said to-day, "and there was Hilary scribbling away for dear life. I expect she writes rather good letters, doesn't she?"

"Yes. Mother has packets of them—all she wrote while she was away—from India and Constantinople and Greece and Belgium, Holland and Russia."

"She is rather extraordinary for twenty-three," Henrietta mused. "She's more like thirty. . . . Who was it said somebody was 'spiritually an idiot'?"

Claire was too much accustomed to her friend's inconsequence to be puzzled by this question.

"She makes me feel a child," Henrietta pursued, "and yet all the time I'm conscious of my superiority! I suppose children feel like that about grown-ups. . . . She does do her hair well."

"She does so many things well."

"Yes; she's damnably capable. If she came and did 'cool hand on the brow' to me, I should have an instantaneous relapse." The speaker had witnessed the pillow-shaking. "And now that I come to think of it, she's not at all unlike a hospital nurse." She proceeded further to malign that profession.

"But," Claire protested, "she doesn't bore me with her love affairs, nor tell her fortune perpetually by cards; she keeps them for Pauline."

"You don't mean to say you want to hear about her conquests?" cried Henrietta. "I've always imagined you weren't inquisitive."

"I'm not exactly curious; but I'd rather like her to want to make a friend of me."

"Good Lord!—the Happy Catechist?"

"Yes. I don't like being left out of it with her and Pauline."

"I thought because of Pauline, though."

"Yes, that too," Claire explained. "I mind awfully Pauline preferring her to me; but, besides that, I want Hilary to approve of me. I rather despise myself for it, because I don't care for her."

"Does Pauline prefer her?"

"Yes, I'm sure she does. She told me when she came back from Aunt Connie's that she and Hilary were pretty thick."

"Must it be one or t'other of you—for Pauline?"

"It seems so. She told me that Hilary confided in her, whereas I didn't. She complained of my being too reserved."

"You could have kept her, then?" Henrietta said gently, after a pause. She was always inciting Claire to analysis, seldom by precept, very often by example—her own honesty was unflinching—and by this direct method.

Claire looked at her for a few moments, and then replied: "I suppose if I was a different person I might. Though I don't see how I could compete with Hilary—

she's rather an unusual person, we all agree. No wonder Pauline is excited by her. But perhaps if I'd confided in her—Pauline, I mean—and been very intimate with her, she'd have gone on as we were. The trouble is that the only thing I have to confide in is too—too serious. It's difficult enough to talk to you about it."

Henrietta nodded. "Whereas," she said, "Hilary probably has dozens of lively experiences to shell out—nice boys in Petersburg, and charming subalterns in Quetta—pukka sahibs, what?—and all that. Not to speak of Belgee poets; though I must own I think Felix Gregoire deserves a better fate than to be one of Hilary's tame cats."

"The funny thing is," Claire answered, "that I'm certain he takes her with a grain of salt——"

"With his tongue in his cheek?"

"Yes, a little. And yet you can see he likes and admires her."

"I'm longing to see what Clement makes of her; he'll size her up," said Henrietta, with thoughtful relish. "By the way, I asked Pauline to find out at the hospital whether it was bad for him to see more than one person. I'd like to go to-morrow."

"Oh, do. I expect I shall be out to-morrow—don't you think so?" Claire's voice was so childlike and appealing that her friend rose, bent over and stooped to kiss her.

"I hope so," she answered. "But look here, we've jawed long enough. Couldn't you sleep now till lunch?"

"Perhaps, if you read to me. Read me some Rupert Brooke."

"There's a splendid somnoliser among the Hawaiian ones," said Henrietta, turning the pages. Then she began to read:

" ' In your arms was still delight
Quiet as a street at night;
And thoughts of you, I do remember,
Were green leaves in a darkened chamber' . . . "

Claire closed her eyes, and let the soft words lull her ; all peace was in those couplets, all fulfilment of her desire. It was herself speaking ; and yet, if it was Clement, how gladly she would play the part of comforter. . . .

“ . . . O infinite deep I never knew,
I would come back, come back to you,
Find you, as a pool unstirred,
Kneel down by you, and never a word,
Lay my head, and nothing said,
In your hands, ungarlanded ;
And a long watch you would keep ;
And I should sleep, and I should sleep ! ”

Claire saw again Clement's head tilted on the pillow, shadowed by the screen, and his hand, lying in the full light, palm upwards on the coverlet. Then sleep descended on her eyelids.

When Henrietta had quietly left the room she met Pauline, who told her that she had seen the nurse, who said that the doctors were pleased with the rate at which Clement's leg was healing, and that there was no objection to his having several visitors.

“ I think I'll go this afternoon, then.”

“ Will you stay to lunch ? ”

“ No, thanks awfully ; I've promised to meet Lucy to look at some rat-tail spoons he wants to buy.”

Pauline, returning to the back drawing-room, informed Hilary that Clement was better. The latter turned round in her chair, still holding the long emerald-green quill pen she affected. “ Oh, good ; then I can go and see him this p.m.,” she said.

“ Well, I've just arranged with Henrietta to go,” her sister answered, glancing round the room until she espied her book.

“ Oh ! ” Then, after a pause : “ Is she a great friend of his ? ”

“ I don't think so,” Pauline spoke with preoccupation, turning over the leaves of the novel.

Hilary, still twisted towards her, tried another tack. "Did he talk about the front?"

"No. He told me a little about Margesson—his friend, you know, who died of wounds. The rest of the time we talked about tennis."

Hilary hesitated as to which sign-post was the more significant. "He's keen, is he?" she finally asked.

Pauline nodded. "He said the doctors didn't think his limp would be very bad."

"Does Claire play?"

Pauline shook her head and began to read.

Hilary, returning on her tracks, took the other road. "Did you know this Margesson?"

Pauline glanced up, perceived the determination expressed in her sister's face, and resigned her book. "No," she answered, "I know nothing about him."

"Doesn't Claire? I think he sounds interesting. Margesson is a very good name." She emphasised the word "good" as does one who uses it to describe a fabric of quality, not in the pseudo-slang way in which one says "that's a good colour." She meant that the family bearing the name was old and respected, not that the name satisfied her æsthetic sense or her imagination.

"Is it?" said Pauline. She was just beginning to be familiar with the subtleties of Hilary's language—those words that were identical with her's and Claire's, but which, she had gradually become aware by tone and context, meant something she and Claire expressed differently or not at all; and those words, foreign or slang, which she had perhaps heard but never used, such as *pukka* and *cliché*, *schwärmerei* and *poveretta*, to which Hilary gave each its own special inflection and significance. This element of strangeness in her sister's talk had an irresistible fascination for Pauline; here she caught glimpses and whiffs of coloured and varied existences, wide horizons, strange tongues, far places—the stimulus of new experiences. She had in her talk with Claire omitted to speak of one of Hilary's strongest

holds upon her imagination—not deliberately, but because she was unconscious of it. Now, as always, she responded to the particular tone in which her sister made the apparently trivial remark about the name of Clement's dead friend ; and, as Hilary still kept silence, she repeated with fully awakened interest : “ Is it ? ”

“ Yes. I wonder if Clement knows any of his people ? Of course, one can't cross-question him about such a painful subject.”

“ Of course not,” Pauline agreed, “ but I expect Claire knows.”

They went together to Park Square on the afternoon of the following day, with Thomas on a lead. By special permission he was to be allowed into the ward. They found Clement sitting up in bed.

“ Here's Hilary,” said Pauline.

“ I've been longing to come for days,” said Hilary, taking his hand and looking at him steadily while she smiled. “ I've heard such lots about you.”

“ It's very nice of you,” he answered, with a touch of shyness, and immediately looked past her at her companion.

“ Here's Thomas,” said Pauline, bringing the bulldog close to the bedside.

All the time that Clement caressed Thomas and conversed with Thomas's mistress Hilary studied him closely. The moment he turned to her, however, her face broke into an effusive smile. “ And how's the leg ? ” she asked.

“ Oh, splendid,” he replied. “ The old trout says I can get up the day after to-morrow, and sit in a chair. I shall be perfectly fit soon. How are Mrs. Norris and Claire ? ”

“ Mother's practically well,” said Pauline, “ and Claire normal to-day, and is going to get up. She swears she's coming to see you in the car to-morrow. By the way, mother says as soon as they let you out you're to tell us, and we'll come and take you out in the car.”

"Thanks, most awfully; that is good of her. The old trout thinks I can start walking with sticks in about ten days or a fortnight. As soon as that happens I shall begin agitating about a job—light duty or something." All the time he spoke, as during Pauline's speech, his eyes were fixed on her ingenuously, almost with greed; and when, asking whom he meant by the "old trout," she smiled, immediately an echoing smile came to his lips and eyes, as though he could not but reflect her slightest change of mood or manner.

"Claire said something about Bill Osler wangling you a job in the War Office," Pauline remarked; "he has a cousin who's a big pot there, I think."

"Then you'd be in London," said Hilary brightly, glancing from one to the other of her companions.

"That's very nice of Osler," Clement answered. "Claire's always taking trouble of one sort or another. Don't let her come out sooner than she ought, Pauline—although, of course, I want awfully to see her again."

As they left the hospital Hilary expressed regret that Clement hadn't mentioned Margesson.

"Oh, well, he wouldn't in front of a person he'd never seen before," her sister pointed out.

"No, of course he wouldn't. Still, I don't feel like a stranger with him; he seems more like a nice relation."

Pauline recognised the truth of this description, and made a sound of agreement.

When they reached home she went up to Claire's room. Claire was up and dressed, sitting near the window, for it was a warm afternoon.

"How is Clement?" she asked, deliberately, with an effort.

"Oh, much better! He is anxious to see you again, but he doesn't want you to go out too soon. He's going to get up in two days, and he's to start walking with crutches soon—I think he said in about a week."

"I wonder when he'll be able to come and stay here?" Claire murmured.

"I should think fairly soon. Hilary says," she went on, smiling a little, "that Clement seems like a relation."

"Oh . . . yes."

"I say, Claire," Pauline asked in a few moments, settling herself in a chair with a comfortable, confidential air, "tell me about Mr. Margesson."

Claire was intensely sensitive to atmosphere. It was some weeks now since Pauline had spoken thus, settled herself thus, with a suggestion of close intimacy; it brought a sudden warmth to her heart; it seemed for a little while that they were close together again, with no third sister to interrupt their converse, break their tie, bring busy noise and light into their soft-hued seclusion. Pauline's recent visit to Clement gave her, too, an added value—though she was dear enough without that to make an hour alone with her pleasant and refreshing. She had lost her hyacinth air, but nothing dimmed her beauty; the tall, self-contained pink tulip was still fresh and graceful, though with a garden rather than with a wild-wood freshness and grace. Claire thought that if only Pauline would always be like this, would care greatly for her, Claire's, company, and seek it, it would not matter what Hilary thought of them; they two would snap their fingers at Miss Monk-Norris, her worldly wisdom, her competency, her unruffled good-humour, her steady brightness, her grasp, her breadth, her colossal self-confidence.

"I know very little," she said, bending down to pat Matthew, and draw him into the intimacy too. "He and Clement made friends very quickly—at once. His real name was Mosenstein, and he was a diamond merchant. He was fearfully keen on the war—on downing the Germans, although he had German relations. I think that some of the other men were rather snarky about him, poor man—I suppose because he was a Jew. He left all his money to Clement."

"Oh! Had he a lot?"

"I don't know how much. But Clement said his father

had died at the beginning of the war and he was an only son. What are you smiling at ? ”

Pauline laughed outright. “ I’m amused because Hilary thought he must be a nut—she seemed to think Margesson was a nutty name—and he was really Mosenstein ! ”

Claire did not even smile. Hilary had intruded again, bringing with her through the medium of Pauline’s young, untarnished beauty, a horrible breath of coarseness and vulgarity into the quiet, happy room ; a breath from garish music halls where jokes are cracked about Jews, curates, henpecked husbands, drink and mothers-in-law. Claire had almost a shudder of repulsion, and said suddenly : “ It must be tea-time. Take Matthew out for a minute, will you ? ”

Mrs. Norris appeared in the back drawing-room for tea ; Tom Norris also came in, a little late, and conversation was general. It was not till bed-time that Hilary and Pauline had further converse alone.

At that hour Hilary followed her sister into her room, and stood by the dressing-table, examining the blue Wedgwood medallions on the brushes and boxes one after the other. “ Is Claire going out to-morrow ? ” she presently inquired.

“ She didn’t say.”

“ Pauline, these are delightful. Your room is delightful altogether—and so like you. It was so right to have it panelled, and all cream and buff. Your clothes and yourself provide the necessary colour.”

The compliment was sufficiently indirect and veiled to please the younger girl without making her self-conscious. “ I’m glad you like it,” she said.

“ I’ve seen a lovely piece of green and orange shot silk at Liberty’s which I’d like to stretch on the wall over my bed. My room wants colour, don’t you agree ? You must come with me to Liberty’s and look at it.”

“ Rather ! Of course I will It is a dull little room.”

"Yes. But I'm gradually brightening it up. Claire's is a funny monastic retreat."

"Monastic?" Pauline echoed, puzzled.

"I must say I prefer yours and mine!" Hilary's tone linked them together as devotees of gaiety and colour. "I suppose Claire will be down to-morrow."

"Oh! I say, Hilary" Pauline exclaimed lightly and carelessly, with a spurt of amusement, lapped in the congenial atmosphere of appreciation and mutual understanding which Hilary could at moments create. "Claire says Margesson's real name was Mosenstein, and that he left his money to Clement!"

A wise instinct kept the other silent; too swift a reply, or further questioning, might have brought home to Pauline that she had been indiscreet, that she had repeated something told her in confidence. This did in fact occur to her after Hilary had left her, but she pushed aside the uncomfortable suspicion that she had done something to which Claire would object. "After all," she told herself, "Hilary is one of the family; what Claire and I know, it can't matter her knowing." But the discomfort remained at the back of her mind.

CHAPTER XVIII

STAGE MANAGEMENT

"In fact," Hilary summed up, "it's quite obvious to me that Clement has the makings of a rather remarkable young man."

Pauline grunted a polite assent, not unlike a nurse who, in answer to her charge's command of "Look!" replies "Yes" in an unconvincing manner without moving her eyes from her sewing. She was seriously occupied in trying on shoes, of which several pairs had just arrived on approval. They, and their boxes, and the box-lids, lay scattered about the floor of her room, into which a beautiful late May afternoon brought a happy light and warmth, and a breeze the rumour of Westminster. There were white satin shoes with Louis heels, and white satin dancing shoes with no heels at all; spangled shoes, shoes of silver, and shoes of pearl-sewn brocade. The latter were at present on Pauline's feet, and she was walking a few steps this way and that, with her head bent to see how they looked, and her attention concentrated to register how they felt. "*I think these,*" she murmured, "but Leonard says no heels. That's absurd; one can't wear a sort of semi-Georgian dress with ballet shoes, can one? On the other hand, I do see that high heels aren't awfully moon-maidenish."

"But then, strictly speaking, a moon-maiden wouldn't wear a semi-Georgian garment."

"Well, I don't know: who says so?" Pauline answered, but gaily and without contradictoriness. It was impossible to be anything to-day but gay; it was such lovely weather; the shoes were so soft, fine and

expensive ; she and her sisters were going to a dance to-night ; and her mauve tulle dress had come back from the cleaners looking as good as new. Life was eminently a success ; and it was distinctly enhanced by the presence of Hilary, who was never out of temper or dismal, never absorbed in thought or unready for action, never secret or hard to understand.

" I say, I believe I interrupted you," said Pauline suddenly with amused compunction. " Go on about Clement. Why is he remarkable ? "

" I don't say he is ; I say he might become so—if he had the right kind of surroundings. I talked to him all yesterday morning about farming, and he is full of ideas—progressive ideas—and schemes for experimenting with land and stock and so on. And then, my dear, with all that, he's so presentable."

" Oh, yes. Why, did you think before you saw him that he was a country bumpkin ? "

" Well, all sorts have commissions nowadays. And then, Claddie likes some very queer fish, doesn't she ? So that was no guarantee. Shall you have the sequin ones ? "

Pauline had now put into their boxes all the shoes save the pair which was closely sewn with tiny, shimmering discs and crystal beads. These she was holding up and turning so that they caught the light.

" Yes, I think so—or the pearl ones. I'd have the ballet shoes if they had shiney things on them . . . it's a nuisance."

" Get out the dress," said Hilary.

Pauline did so, and laid upon the bed a confection of gauze and white satin and silver. As she did so the clock struck three.

" Lord ! " she exclaimed, " they'll be here in half an hour."

It was Saturday, and the Amateur Orchestra was coming to rehearse for the first time Leonard Benjamin's setting of *The Pierrot of the Minute*. He and Pauline had

been practising the songs since early in April, but they had not done so in conjunction with the orchestra. Hilary had been elected to take Leonard's accustomed place as pianist, so that he might sing his songs as he would in the real performance. The Montagues were bringing a flapper cousin to replace Pauline at the 'cello. When the two sisters descended they found Claire and Clement entertaining Freddie Stokes and the Miss Montagues and their cousin; Vera and Leonard arrived soon after, and the rehearsal began.

Claire, and Clement, who had come to Westminster for the first time since his return, remained in the back drawing-room, with the folding doors open. The orchestra grouped itself round the piano, which stood in the corner between window and hearth, and in front of which the singers stood, facing their audience of two. The practice went steadily on for an hour and a half, when tea appeared, and a pleasant chattering relaxation set in.

"Oh, Leonard!" Pauline said, "do you absolutely insist on flat shoes? I've got the most heavenly shiney ones on approval, but with heels."

"Can't we see them?" Miss Montague asked, and Freddie echoed with studied wistfulness, "Yes, can't we see them?"

"I'll get them all," the girl answered, "and then you can help me decide." As she opened the door Vera inquired whether the moon-maiden dress was being kept dark, but Hilary, with a gesture of caution, stopped her, and, propelling her sister gently before her, left the room. As they ascended she said: "Why not put on the dress and try the shoes with it?"

Tea was laid in the big room, and every one was clustered round the table when Hilary reappeared; she entered from the back drawing-room and came forward quickly with a bright, self-satisfied, comprehensive glance at the assembled company. Clement rose to give her his seat, which she took, and some one said: "Where's Pauline?" The young man was still half turned towards Hilary

when the younger girl appeared. Hearing an exclamation he looked over his shoulder, and saw her. Claire, a little behind him, watched the line of his jaw stiffen almost imperceptibly before she too deliberately fixed her eyes on her younger sister.

What had been a meaningless combination of rare delicate fabrics on the bed upstairs was now transformed by the wearer into a beautiful, complicated, elaborately-simple juxtaposition of draperies. Over a long skirt of softest, finely-pleated, pliable silk, panniers of silvery gauze billowed and drooped, while knots of white and silver ribbons decked the shoulders and waist; round the very low-cut neck a wandering mist of gauze was held at rare intervals by mother-of-pearl ornaments; and from under this mist at the back, a straight Watteau panel of white satin fell to the ground. Pauline's neck and arms stood well the test of all that pallor, and above the gauze scarf her fair, faintly-flushed face shone warm and radiant, and her hair, of which each strand had a glint of gold, irresistibly attracted the eyes with the contrast that its colour and modern arrangement made with her dress.

"My hair ought to be powdered, of course," she said, putting up one hand to touch it apologetically. "Look, Leonard, these are the shoes I like," and she held forward one foot encased in sequin-sewn white.

Exclamations of admiration and interest had broken out immediately on her appearance, and the girl visitors and Freddie Stokes crowded round to touch and examine the dress. Hilary stood by looking complacent, as though, Claire said to herself, she had designed and carried out the costume as well as having stage-managed Pauline's entrance. Claire glanced at Clement, who sat a little way off, chin in hand; his eyes were directed to Pauline, but his head was bent towards Leonard Benjamin while the latter spoke to him. She saw him nod in reply, and then Hilary, crossing the room to his side, and ignoring the other guest, said, with a confidential smile: "Isn't she

exquisite, Clement? Don't you think she's delicious in that garment?"

"Yes," he answered, flushing quickly.

"I'd like every one to see and admire her," Hilary went on, with all the pride of authorship; then turning to Leonard Benjamin she added: "You see now what I mean by her being a Romney—a twentieth century Romney? Isn't she rather like Lady Hamilton?"

"Yes, I admit a resemblance," the young musician answered.

"Sometimes I think," Hilary announced, in a slightly lowered tone, and with a short laugh, "that I'd like Pauly to marry a duke: she'd make such a splendid duchess! But she's too good for that—you know what I mean?" She included both the young men in her question. "It would have to be such a very extra kind of duke—not only young and rich, but good and clever as well. So I've resigned *that* castle in Spain."

"What portion of the globe *do* you destine her for?" Leonard asked; and Claire smiled secretly.

"Well, London, of course, part of the time," Hilary answered judicially, "because she's too delicious to be buried in the country all the year. And yet she suits the country beautifully too. It ought really to be about half in half."

Pauline was now gravitating, still the centre of an admiring group, to the door. Hilary went after her, and Clement took a chair near Claire's.

"The dress is a great success, isn't it?" he said.

"Yes, it suits her perfectly; she looks lovely in it," Claire answered with a genuine warmth. "Clement," she went on, "doesn't this sort of thing tire you? Remember, it's your first outing."

"Oh, I'm as fit as possible. I think I shall get quit of Park Square in another ten days."

"Good; then you'll come here."

"Yes. It will be topping for me. I heard from Osler

to-day : he's written to his cousin about me. He seems to have a great scunner on him."

" Yes, he hates him, but he doesn't mind making use of him ! Maurice Osler bets and races and breeds fox-terriers—all the things Bill most hates. But I hope he'll wangle you a job. I suppose you'll have to go and see him. If these people go in time I'll go back to Park Square with you, and walk home. Matthew needs exercise. You'll come to lunch and tea here to-morrow, won't you ? "

" Thanks, I will."

Upstairs Hilary was helping Pauline to change back into normal clothes. " Has it occurred to you," she said, " that Clement is rather particularly attached to you ? "

Her sister stopped in the act of putting on her skirt to answer " No ! " decisively.

" Well, he is."

" Oh, I don't think so, Hilary. I'm not particularly his sort."

" My dear Pauline, take it from me. Not his sort, indeed ! I don't know what sort he wants, in that case. No ; to do Clement justice, he does appreciate you ; why, he can't take his eyes off you ! I feel quite touched by his devotion. He's a charming boy."

" Yes, he's a dear." Her tone was interested but not deeply concerned ; devotion was not quite an unknown tribute ; there had been Russell Lincoln and Ivor Webb and Major Elliot and Freddie Stokes, and one or two others half forgotten now. In a moment, however, another aspect of the subject struck her. " Has Claire noticed, do you think ? " she asked.

Hilary hummed, tapping her fingers on the white bedrail. " He may very likely have confided in her, as they are such great friends ! " she answered. " Yes, I expect Claire has noticed ; sitting like a little mouse, she must see a good deal. She's content to be a spectator, Pauly ; but when you've seen as much as I have and have got experience of people and insight into things, you

want to *use* your knowledge. I must say I'd hate to sit tamely by and let Fate take its course ; and I think you're like me "

As usual, the flattery in the suggestion that Pauline was also a woman of the world, a woman of action, worked with such warm, immediate potency on the latter that she had no attention to spare for any lurking disloyalty to Claire in the implied partnership, or for a defence of Claire against Hilary's derogatory tone. She felt herself at once soothingly lapped in an atmosphere of understanding and appreciation, and pleasantly stimulated to the task of becoming as experienced and accomplished as Hilary. The sense of comradeship was delightful, and that much of the charm was due to the fact that she was being flattered she did not perceive. She had once or twice wondered why her elder sister, with her wide interest, numerous friends and acquaintances all over the world, and her large correspondence, should be so taken up with a girl of only twenty ; there was something disinterested, something almost noble, Pauline thought, in Hilary's preoccupation with her. The same idea had never once occurred to her with regard to Claire ; she took Claire's interest for granted. Hilary, returned after three years, was something rich and strange, and the enthusiasm with which she discussed her youngest sister's clothes and conquests, flirtations and future was in itself a form of flattery that no girl of unformed character and adaptability could have resisted.

"Clement reminds me a little," Hilary presently went on, in a voice as nearly approaching the softly reminiscent as she could attain, "of such a nice man I knew in Simla : a Captain Everard. He made love in the dearest way—I could hardly bear to refuse him. He had the same way of looking at me as though I was a revelation from heaven as Clement has of looking at you. And he was so shy and charmingly awkward about it all, like a great schoolboy, only not horribly clumsy, you know. They make the very nicest kind of husbands, that sort."

"Why didn't you marry him?"

"My dear child, he hadn't a sou. And anyway I wasn't prepared to live in India for the rest of my life. Of course, I was very young then, but still, I knew it wouldn't do. I dare say if he'd been in Clement's position I should have succumbed," she added gaily.

"Come on," Pauline replied, "I'm ready."

They returned to the drawing-room and began to eat a belated tea, in the midst of which Hilary was called to the telephone. This instrument was situated in the front hall, with an extension to the library; and the girl, not wishing to be overheard, went into the room to answer it. As she hung up the receiver her father entered, with letters in his hand, which he at once began to slit open with a paper-knife.

"More dissipations?" he said, with his habitual grim good-humour.

"More and more," Hilary answered lightly, going to the door. Here, however, she paused, as though a thought had struck her, and she asked if he wanted tea.

"No, I've had some . . . T's, t's, t's," and he shook his head over the letter he was reading.

"Do you want Claddie?" the girl inquired, lingering. "The party is just going."

"When she's got time; when she's nothing to do—no hurry. Don't bother her."

Hilary went up to the drawing-room again, and, going over to Claire, said: "Father seems to have got the wind up over his letters. Could you go down to him for a minute?"

Claire glanced round; the Montague girls were already saying good-bye. She followed them downstairs and went to the library.

Tom Norris dictated to her a long urgent letter, which she took straight on to her typewriter. When it was done she rose. "I'm going back with Clement to Park Square," she said.

"I thought I heard his voice outside just now," her

father answered. "Hurry along there, young miss, or you'll keep him waiting."

Claire found no one in the hall, where, however, they might easily have been without her hearing, for the noise of her machine at close quarters filled her ears to the exclusion of further noises; she ran up to the drawing-room and found Hilary alone.

"Where's Clement?" she asked.

"Oh, Clement and Pauline went off in a taxi. I told him you were busy with father, and Pauline wanted to give Thomas a run, so she took him in with them and is going to walk part of the way back."

Claire stood dumb before this open confession of outrageous manœuvring. She parted her lips but closed them helplessly again, while Hilary sat sewing calmly and steadily by the window. Her green bag, her gilt scissors, her scarlet needle-book, a roll of white lace and a knot of sky-blue ribbon, lay in a group of bright patches on the parquet at her feet. The linen chemise, full of innumerable tiny stitches and fine embroidery had grown with remarkable rapidity during the last few days; Claire longed to tear it from her competent hands, squeeze it into a crumpled ball, and hurl it into her astonished face. Instead, she turned slowly towards the open aperture between the rooms; there Matthew confronted her, with bright eyes asking for a walk. She took three swift steps and knelt down by him, encircling his grey neck with her arms. He moved, unwilling to be imprisoned, anxious for liberty, but she held him for a moment, kissing his velvety nose and soft head between his ears.

"How you do love that dog!" said Hilary in clear, amused, tolerant tones.

Claire raised herself and faced her again. After a pause. "He'd never be unkind; he'd never harm me," she answered, and turned finally away.

She took Matthew into Victoria Street, drearily empty on Saturday afternoon. The shops were closed, the

Stores shuttered and barricaded. A few Anzacs patrolled hither and thither, a few lovers strolled. Claire, passing mutually-absorbed couples with linked arms, had a sudden sharp pang of envy such as she had never felt before, and a sudden desolate sense of being one unwooed, unlinked ; unmindful, even, of the special significance of Saturday, when works and offices, shops and areas disgorge their employées for a half-holiday. Saturday was meaningless to her ; but then, so were the other days, so was the world ; she was cut off from something which gave each day a core, each week a culmination, and life itself a value and a tinge of glory ; she was, somehow, outside. She began to look curiously at the couples she passed, some standing entranced, some pacing slowly ; but immediately she caught herself up from prying and spying : Leave them to their joy.

A taxi passed her slowly ; she thought of Clement and Pauline together.

Presently she turned back and, glancing westward, saw sunset clouds hanging above the roof-tops, lambent and remote, saffron and rose ; the roofs and chimneys were violet—dark against the pure, far field of ether. Fronting it, a high window across the street flashed like a golden diamond, like a sudden conflagration.

In Claire's mood of heightened sensibility and emotion, any incident was food for fancy, anything could become an image of existence. She saw herself now as a lower window, blank and grey, which never can or will reflect the intense radiance of sunset ; which can at best be but a clear pane, at worst a mirror of dull walls opposite. She made an involuntary sound that was half a sob, and Matthew, passing close, looked up with curiosity and trust and friendliness into her face, and saw her eyes, magnified by shining tears, gazing steadfastly ahead.

CHAPTER XIX

THE STEADFAST FRIEND

THROUGHOUT the first week of June, Clement spent a large part of each day at the Norrises', returning to Park Square for late dinner, sleep, breakfast, and the treatment of his wound. He could now walk with a stick; the doctors were satisfied with his cure, so far, although he would always have a slight limp, due to the fracture of his ankle bone.

Since Hilary's decision to approve of him, an event which, except in so far as its result was a closer relation with Pauline, neither pleased nor displeased him—of which, in fact, he was unconscious—he had been as often in her and Pauline's company as in Claire's. He was treated by Mr. and Mrs. Norris as a son, by Hilary as a protégé, by Claire and Pauline as a brother. The latter had ceased to ignore him; she even evinced a desire for his presence. The words, "Where's Clement?" or "Isn't Clement coming?" were often on her lips, and every time this happened in Claire's presence, the latter had a spasm of jealousy to master, a pang to hide. She was successful. Never a hint of competition, never a shadow of rivalry, marred the open fraternity of the sisters' relations with the young man. Even Hilary had stopped manœuvring—the need for manœuvres had gone. She openly discussed Clement's future with him, advising him to buy an estate with farms on a main line—this last as a precaution against his becoming what Pauline called "moss-grown"; and Clement took the offers of advice good-humouredly, but would not be drawn into discussion. Claire thought that she could detect in him a certain

reservation with regard to Hilary ; though he had never said anything to suggest that he resented her interest ; he seemed to take her, with her sisters, perfectly for granted.

One day in the first week of June, when her father was out, Claire took some work up to the back drawing-room. The folding doors were shut, and beyond them Pauline was playing Schumann's "Carnival" ; probably Clement was with her. Presently Hilary came in dressed for walking.

"Hollo, where are you going to ?" Claire asked.

"I had a telephone message from Claridge's that Mrs. Byng had arrived there and wants me to lunch with her. You know she's Major Elliot's sister ? She might very easily be useful—knows everybody. Her husband has a flagship." While speaking, she came close to Claire, and stooped to pick up an article which had fallen from the latter's knee. It was a receipt book, and Hilary began—whether idly or with intention her sister did not know—to turn the pages.

"Is this one of father's ?" she asked.

"Yes," Claire answered, stretching out her hand for it. "It's the Serb thing he's treasurer for."

Before handing it back the other turned to the latest inscribed counterfoil, and said, "Hollo ! 'Lieut. Clement Parsons.' So father rooked Clement ten pounds !" She handed the book back with a short laugh.

Claire made no answer, and her sister continued : "He's very generous, if he contributes that amount to every one who asks him."

"He is generous," Claire remarked mildly.

"Oh, well, he can afford to be," Hilary returned ; and at that moment, so insolent were her words and tone, her sister could have strangled her. What did Hilary know of Clement's means ? Only what she could deduce from hearing that he had sold Sparrow's Farm, and she did not even accurately know the extent of that ; she had not yet been to Sparrows.

Mrs. Norris now entered, fortunately, to interrupt a colloquy so painful to Claire, and to ask her children's plans for lunch. "I'm going to Lady Eden's," she said, "and I've arranged with Clement to drop him at Stewart's; he's meeting his Aunt Julia for lunch there."

"Could you drop me at Claridge's, mother?" Hilary inquired.

"Of course, dear. Come along. Where's Clement? Claddie, you and Pauline will be alone with Tom. See that he eats enough."

When they had departed, Pauline came in and sat down opposite her sister.

"Claire," she said, "I've been feeling guilty for ages—no, to be truthful, I'd forgotten all about it, but I *did* feel guilty; and Clement talking about that Margesson man to-day reminded me of it."

"Of what?"

"That I told Hilary what I suppose was a secret—about him leaving his money to Clement. I let it out quite without thinking."

"When?"

"Oh, weeks ago—just after you'd told me. Does it matter?"

Claire was thinking: "So that's what put her on to Clement!" hearing again the voice of Hilary say: "Oh, well, he can afford to be."

"No," she said, "I don't suppose Clement would mind Hilary knowing, as long as she doesn't pass it on——"

"Why should she?"

"But of course I wouldn't like Clement to feel he couldn't tell me things because they got repeated. Perhaps I was wrong to tell you."

"I'm sorry, Claire," Pauline said, with genuine remorse, "though I can't see how he could mind, as long as it didn't go outside the family."

"I don't expect he'll mind if you tell him," Claire answered dully. It was with heavy sorrow that she

remembered the occasion on which she had confided in her sister—the sense of renewed friendship, of intimacy and affection; it had meant so much to her, evidently so little to Pauline.

“Yes, I’ll tell him,” said the latter, almost eagerly, then, looking at the other with a faintly embarrassed air—unusual in her and unexplained by her words—she went on: “You know, Claddie, that Hilary thought I ought to have married Major Elliot? It’s his sister she’s gone to lunch with. It’s rather an odd coincidence—his engagement is in *The Times* to-day.” Her faint embarrassment was still unexplained.

“Yes, I know—about Hilary, I mean; I hadn’t noticed his engagement. But when you say ‘ought to have married him,’ I suppose you mean she thinks you would have done well for yourself if you had?”

“I suppose so, you old hair-splitter.”

“Because you certainly oughtn’t to marry anybody you don’t care for awfully,” said Claire, tentatively, but with inward determination to make the most of this rare hour alone with her sister.

“Yes,” Pauline agreed, with unusual gentleness.

“I’m certain it’s worth waiting for that,” the other pursued in the same tone, with her eyes fixed on her sister’s face.

“Yes,” the latter repeated, turning as if under compulsion towards her sister.

“And you’ll know,” Claire told her, “when it happens.”

“For certain?” the younger girl asked, like a child asking guidance of a wise elder. Her humility, her gentleness, her bright and happy countenance, moved Claire profoundly; she hesitated before giving the desired assurance.

“Yes, yes, I’m sure you’ll know,” she finally said. “Perhaps not quite for certain at first; but after a little while you’ll feel it so clearly, you won’t have any doubts at all.”

Pauline answered nothing ; she had come as near to avowal as was possible in the circumstances. Her embarrassment was explained ; her reference to Major Elliot had been her ingenuous method of leading up to the topic which was occupying her thoughts ; Claire was profoundly glad and grateful that she should have indirectly consulted her on a question of such vital importance ; it showed that Pauline was not finally and completely alienated from her by Hilary's influence. The revelation of the bent of Pauline's thoughts did not startle her ; no visible or audible sign of her younger sister's awakened interest in the young man had been lost on her ; nor did she ignore the probable effect on Pauline of Hilary's attitude towards him—an attitude of pleased discovery, not untinged with surprise that any friend of Claire's should be so worthy of liking and respect. Claire could not, of course, know, though she suspected, how far Hilary had gone in verbal suggestion to Pauline ; but she thought the interest shown by Hilary in his future, and the advice she proffered, attributable not merely to her innate and constant wish to have a finger in every pie, but also to a mental pairing of him with Pauline.

This brought her to a subject which had been puzzling her a little—Clement's contented acceptance of the prospect of a safe post. Negotiations were already on foot to obtain his transference from his regiment either to one occupied in home service, or to the War Office ; these could not be carried further until his discharge from hospital and the definite utterances of a Medical Board, which events were not expected to occur till the end of June. Meanwhile, he showed no displeasure at the unlikelihood of his return to the front, and, knowing him, Claire was surprised.

On the day following her conversation with Pauline she found herself, for the first time since he had been allowed the freedom of his days, alone with Clement in circumstances which precluded interruption, and she

determined to approach the subject so as to ascertain his feelings.

They were in the Norrises' car on the way to Bond Street, having dropped Mrs. Norris in Knightsbridge, on the quest of a wedding present for Henrietta Lincoln, whose marriage was fixed for the third week in June. Claire's errand was at once a pleasant and a painful one ; the purchase of a wedding gift such as would delight Henrietta was an act she had been looking forward to ; but lately weddings, engagements, and all things connected therewith held something of pain for her ; not only envy, of which she was ashamed, but some other emotion too, strangely compact of sinking fear and numb resignation, as though they reminded her of a doom which she dreaded, but was impotent to avert. She left this sensation unanalysed ; she shirked the contemplation of it ; she had not mentioned it to Henrietta ; she scarcely admitted its existence to herself. But to-day she suffered it afresh, sitting in the limousine with windows open, Clement at her side, the neat woman-chauffeur in front, and London—the London of the Season although the London of war-time—humming on all sides.

“ Are you looking forward to going to the War Office ? ” she asked.

He did not answer at once, but leaned towards the window, looking out ; it was a dull, warm day. “ I think so—quite,” he finally brought out. “ Why ? Do you think I shall be fearfully at sea there ? ”

“ Oh no ! I'm sure you won't.”

“ And of course I mayn't get it. They may send me on light duty to Lowestoft or somewhere God-forsaken like that. Or on the Staff in France. It all depends in the first case on what my Board says, and in the second whether Lieutenant-Colonel Maurice Osler wangles successfully. I imagine that dozens of men want War Office jobs. However, my luck may last.”

“ I only hope so.”

“ I *have* had luck, Claire ! It makes me feel a skunk ;

when you think of the chaps who have been out for months—years even, and who'll remain there. Not to mention the other poor chaps. . . . Yes, I can't deny I regard it as luck. I don't thirst for the trenches. If I've got to be done in, I want to see some life first. Of course it's worse for men who leave wives and families, but at least they've had something."

"Yes," Claire agreed softly.

He turned to her with a suddenly confiding air, and said smiling, a little embarrassed, "Claire, I'm rather in love with life nowadays. D'you understand that feeling?"

"Of course I do, Clement. And I'm fearfully glad you do. It's a splendid feeling."

He kept his eyes on her face, still with an intimate, boyish, infinitely appealing smile, and replied, "I know you do. You understand everything, Claire." And, though smiling, his tone was deep with recognition of her friendship.

She looked back at him steadily, with pride and joy and misery, surrendering in that moment—not him, whom she had never possessed, but the last faint, sick, secret hope, the last pale, mortally-wounded dream, the unuttered, unformulated, impossible demand. She could will and wish now only for him—never for herself; and work and win for him; yes, even though it entailed wishing and working in conjunction with her sister Hilary. She had realised once, months ago, soon after his first advent to Westminster, that she could finally refuse him nothing; then, at Sparrows, that principle seemed to have been belied; she had obeyed her own unerring instinct and not the message of his burning look; but the contradiction was more apparent than real—that desire of his was so fortuitous and transient. What he had wanted then without knowing, and what he wanted now, and knew that he wanted—the desire lying before and after the week-end at Sparrows—was the essential desire to which she responded. It was a blade dividing him from her, but which she took to her heart, for it had

become a sacred trophy ; he had offered it to her wreathed with his praise. She could not be less than he thought her : his steadfast friend. And she believed, to-day, for the first time, that his desire was not impossible ; that it was indeed within his reach, should he stretch out his hand eagerly, ardently, swiftly enough. She knew that Pauline would respond to no timid or half-hearted lover, far less succumb ; he must be bold and open, he must give his passion play. Only by open eagerness and ardour could he hope to win her ; and swiftness was needful because, while now he held the field alone, at any moment a rival might appear.

" Clement," she said, lightly, but with an undertone of serious advice, " be as impulsive as you feel ; don't check yourself ; above all, don't be diffident. Oh, Clement, diffidence is the devil. Go ahead and enjoy life, and "—she broke off, fearing that her solemnity would rise up and engulf her surface gaiety. The young man supplied the end of the sentence.

" And damn the consequences, were you going to say ? That's what I feel like to-day ; but I must say, Claire, I wouldn't have expected such reckless counsel from you ! " he laughed happily.

" I know your opinion of me," Claire answered, laughing too. " You needn't repeat it. According to you, when some one asks me what I did in the Great War, my answer ought to be : ' Straw-chopping and hair-splitting ! ' "

The rest of their speech had no serious undercurrent. Claire, dissembling her sickened heart, listened to his voice as he talked and jested, took covert glances at his brown, balanced profile, and wondered if the horror of the situation in which she found herself would drive her sooner or later from his presence—away somewhere, she knew not where, out of the sight and the sound of the being she loved best in the world.

Claire was the only member of the Norris family invited to attend Henrietta's marriage ceremony. This took

place very quietly at a Registry Office, decorated—or rather, hung and quartered—with photographs of former registrars. Lucy; a Lincoln uncle, holding by the hand a thin, polite, intensely interested female child; an artist friend of Bill's on crutches; and Bill's elder sister, Mrs. Warren, fashionably dressed and obviously regarding the whole affair as daringly unconventional, were the only other guests; for Henrietta, though she had a wide circle of acquaintances, had no very intimate friend save Claire, and few relatives, while Bill had been determined all along to make the actual wedding as secret as possible. "As we can't have a fancy-dress pageant with high-born infants chucking rosebuds about and Henrietta disguised as a Harrod's White Sale—I mean, as the Snow Queen—let's be as furtive and dark and suspicious as possible, what?" he said.

"If it's suspicion you want, Bill," Henrietta answered, "you may set your mind at rest: people are bound to think—if not say—that I'm getting married in a hurry for a very good reason. . . . I think it's only kind to bring a little entertainment into the drab life of our District Registrar. I'm sure he hardly married anybody, except a few barristers from the Inns—and I expect they correct his legal phraseology, which must be galling. The rest of the time I think he commissions oaths—yes, I know that sounds amusing—so it would be if they were my oaths; but really it's the most stodgy occupation. . . . The only thorn in the ointment is that I *thought* the army had turned Bill into a real English gentleman; but it was actually he who *suggested* being married at a Registry Office." Her voice took on a deep note of scandalised horror. "Think of that, Claire! He belongs to the brutal and licentious soldiery. . . . Every one knows that Registry Offices are improper. . . . Of course, I meant to dispense with a ceremony altogether," she added, with a sudden change to a tone of exaggerated cheerfulness.

Not for the first time during her speech Claire glanced apprehensively in the direction of Mrs. Warren and Mr.

Lincoln senior ; she did not know whether these persons were accustomed to Henrietta's burlesques, and hoped that they had not overheard her recent verbal indiscretions.

They were standing in the brilliant June sunshine outside the office, waiting for the arrival of Bill's friend, who was to sign the register. All who passed stared, and turned to stare again over their shoulders at the coloured group, and to wonder at its business. Claire, dimly conscious of a sinking sensation, was glad to stand silent in the heat and light, one of a cheerful company ; she had for the moment abrogated all personal sentiments and moods, and responded to the collective feeling of gaiety and satisfaction. Henrietta and Bill were happy, momentarily at least ; Mrs. Warren was prosperous and contented, and stimulated now by an impression that she was being Bohemian ; the elderly Mr. Lincoln, though serious, was mild and calm ; the quick-eyed precocious child was full of quiet satisfaction with her muslin dress and blue ribbons and importance. Only Lucy, aloof and silent, recalled her to everyday life and her own troubles ; he was for her a more poignant reminder of the war than Bill's uniform ; his eyes, staring darkly but not vacantly across the street above the heads of his companions, seemed to pierce the houses and the miles and to contemplate the battle-fields of France and Flanders. It was more probable, however, that he was simply sad at the imminent loss of Henrietta. Claire told herself that she was apt to attribute too visionary and romantic a cast to Lucy's melancholy. At this moment a taxi drove up and the young officer, with only one leg and crutches, was helped to descend.

Afterwards they all lunched in Soho—"to be as Compton Mackenzie-ish as possible," Henrietta explained for the benefit of Mrs. Warren. Their entrance to the restaurant caused a small stir ; the juxtaposition of maimed manhood, manhood unmarred and obviously newly married, and delicate femininity always titillates

the mental palate of the partially-educated. The restaurant was discreet but not cheap ; the patrons were leisured ; they had both time and taste to speculate as to the relationship of the wedding party, and to criticise the women's clothes.

" This is beastly," said Henrietta softly to Claire as they chose their seats, " I thought I liked notoriety, but this is odious. Sit by me, Claire ; I don't see why not ; after all, it's my funeral."

When they stood on the platform at Paddington, from which Bill and Henrietta were going to Shropshire for ten days' leave, the latter held Claire's hand tight for several moments, and whispered : " Keep an eye on Lucy : he'll be rather dim."

Her friend nodded ; she did not need the injunction ; her sympathy was already his. He would be very lonely for this week ; but fortunately for him his sister was to return to their flat for the duration of the war.

When the train had gone she lingered by Lucy's side while they bade good-bye to the other guests and found Bill's friend a taxi. Then, lightly touching his arm, she said ; " Come back to tea with us, will you ? Unless you have to return to work ? "

" No, I've got the afternoon off, thank the Lord ! Yes, I'd like to come."

" Let's walk," said Claire.

It was a glorious afternoon, and the girl was glad that she had put on a thin silk dress and shady hat ; she pitied her companion in his dark blue suit. When they reached the park they sat down by common consent, and while the young man filled his pipe Claire produced a cigarette and borrowed his matches. " I never remember them," she said, thinking of Hilary's characteristic possession of a lighter, which apparently never, like the lighters of less fortunate mortals, failed to ignite.

After a silence Lucy remarked suddenly : " I should like to be married."

" So should I," she answered seriously.

"But it would be appalling never to be alone," he went on slowly. "Of course, Henrietta leaves one alone."

"I like to have some one there most of the time," said Claire. "Some one I like, of course; not to talk much, just to be there."

"Talking only makes things worse," Lucy replied, leaning to one side so as to put away his pouch and pat his pocket, "but it is nice, when you've got the blues, to have some one about."

This brief conversation had carried them, psychologically speaking, a very short way; and yet their sense of intimacy was appreciably increased thereby. Claire felt that through Lucy she could get an insight into the male mind; for while being what is called woman-like in his understanding and atmosphere he was in most ways very masculine, as masculinity is popularly conceived—in his distaste for gossip, his lack of interest in the details of circumstance and character and conduct, his impersonality.

"Men do seem to be more impersonal, than women," she said.

"Yes, I think on the whole they are," he answered. "In that way I prefer them. Yet there's not a single man I'd go a yard out of my way to see. As companions—bar talk—women are far better. Men, when they aren't bores, are more interesting to listen to. At least, that's my personal opinion."

"I believe Hilary's rather masculine," Claire mused. "Perhaps that's why men like her."

Lucy made no immediate reply. He had seen Hilary twice for a short space only, and he had never as far as his companion knew, expressed his opinion of her. "She's good looking," he, however, remarked after a pause. "She's a nice colour. But unless I was in love with her, I think I should find her intolerable."

Such a confidence from the reserved, impersonal Lucy was surprising; Hilary's quickening effect had reached even to him; Claire gave her that much credit; that she

was vital and effective, and either captivated or repelled—unless she exercised both these functions simultaneously.

After a few moments Lucy rose, and stood, half turning his back to her, pushing the tobacco down in the bowl of his pipe with long, pale fingers. “You’re always bearable, Claire,” he said, so simply and sincerely that his statement contained no faintest tinge of patronage; it was at once a calm profession of faith and an indirect offer of friendship.

Claire rose too, and they began to walk again.

Presently he asked, not looking at her: “Aren’t you happy, Claire?”

“One makes happiness out of things—things like this,” she answered, meaning his previous speech as much as the summer weather and greenery which she indicated with a brief gesture. “One makes it up out of a few things and a few friends.”

In spite of his silence she knew that he understood.

As they entered the Norrises’ street at one end, Claire perceived at the other Pauline, pacing slowly beside Clement, who limped, leaning on his stick. They did not see her and Lucy; Pauline’s eyes were cast down and she appeared to be listening attentively to her companion, who, with his face turned urgently towards her—he was only slightly the taller—was speaking without interruption. As the space between the two couples rapidly diminished Claire saw a flicker pass across her sister’s lovely and transparent countenance; and then, as she and Lucy paused before her home, Pauline raised her eyes and gave an exclamation of surprise and recognition.

“How long have you been there?” she cried, while Clement, interrupted in mid-flow of speech, looked disconcerted, paused in his walk, changed his stick to his left hand, and made a brief salute.

“How did it go off?” Pauline pursued, not waiting for an answer to her first question, “and what did Henrietta wear?”

“Pale primrose yellow linen,” said Claire.

" Oh, I suppose you chose it," her sister answered, " and what hat ? "

" A shady hat with blue and yellow and mauve flowers round it."

Mrs. Norris met them in the hall, and the description of Henrietta's appearance had to be repeated with amplifications.

" Had Osler remembered the ring ? " Clement asked, and Lucy replied that Henrietta, in whose keeping it had lain for some weeks—who had, indeed, originally bought it—had given it into her brother's charge that morning.

They all followed Mrs. Norris up to the big drawing-room, where Hilary was playing over a newly-acquired song. She rose on their entrance, with a general smile of greeting, crossed to the bell and rang.

" What do you want ? " Mrs. Norris asked.

" I imagine that everyone wants tea," she answered cheerfully.

Clement sat down, looking Claire thought, a little tired ; but when Pauline went to the piano, and standing, began to play over the treble of the song, he followed her, saying, in a tone of laughing command : " Sing it, Pauline. Sit down and play it properly."

She did so. " The Blackbird's Song " was not new ; she and Claire had heard it some years before at a concert. It suited Pauline's clear, high voice, and there was a captivating sound of spring in the octave interval at the end of the verse, and a certain fresh charm in Rosamund Marriott Watson's words :

" Sweetheart, I ne'er may know
Never may see,
White is the blossoms snow,
Green is the lea,
All the wood sings of you,
All the world rings of you,
Sweetheart, O sweetheart mine,
Where can you be ? "

Claire looked round the room, and thought the spacious,

warm, light interior singularly pleasant and decorative. Red-and-white striped awnings shaded the windows, and the window-boxes were filled with white daisies and pink geraniums. Pauline's dress reproduced the combination ; it was white with a square rose-coloured collar and a deep rose-coloured hem. Hilary wore green linen, and their mother silver-grey. They were all, including herself, fine and strong, delicate and leisured. Every circumstance of their lives matched the quality of their skins and hair and fabrics ; the wide beauty of the room was a fit setting to the beauty and grace of their bodies and their silks and linens. Their well-being amounted to genius.

Claire, listening idly and with pleasure to her sister's voice and the quick-running accompaniment, saw Clement lean to turn the page. Pauline gave him, as he did so, a quick sidelong look, in which Claire thought she discerned both mockery and provocation. It might have been the merest counter of flirtation. Claire had seen Pauline act in much the same way with other men, yet she felt as though she had witnessed a transaction of secrecy and weight ; as though she had unwittingly spied on pledged lovers ; as though she had stolen from Clement, by intercepting a look meant only for him, a part of his legitimate prize. So sharp was her self-distaste that it drowned for a moment the stronger, bitterer ingredient of the cup offered to her lips—only for a moment, for, with a tiny gasp, such as a sudden draught of cold water produces, audible only to Lucy, she rose abruptly, and with one wild, pale, secret, hunted look his way, left the room.

CHAPTER XX

SHAKING THE TREE

"Do you want to go over any of your songs?" Hilary asked.

"No thanks," Pauline answered.

"Does anything need doing to your dress?"

"No thanks."

"Are you nervous?"

"No thanks."

Mrs. Norris interrupted this litany to beg Pauline not to fidget. The latter was standing by one of the windows in the big drawing-room playing with the blind-cord.

"Sorry, mother," she said, and, sitting down, took up *Vogue*. But her eyes deserted the page after a moment and wandered back to the window.

"I don't think it's going to rain," Hilary remarked with cheerful primness.

"Oh! no," Pauline answered, with a slight start.

"I don't think so; at least, I mean, I hope not."

It was the day of the performance, and also the day of Clement's Medical Board. Great white clouds sailed across the blue at intervals and obscured the sun, but only for a moment; there was no threat in them. The awnings were not drawn down to-day, for the heat was not excessive, and the sunlight lay in three great panels across the moted air and on the parquet. In summer, on warm days, the big room was always used; two months of almost continuous habitation had given it that air of intimacy without disorder which turned it from a spacious saloon into a gracious, homely, natural interior. Hilary's green work-bag and a book of *Memoirs* lay on

one table ; on another were piled papers and magazines. Some music was scattered on, and reflected in, the black polished surface of the piano, like the first-fallen leaves on a dark mere ; the writing-table was open. An enormous jar of delphiniums, all shades of blue—metallic, chinese, violet, wedgwood and pale cerulean tinged with green—stood between two of the windows, and like an answering note, two bowls of love-in-the-mist flanked the mantelpiece mirror.

Mrs. Norris, clad in a long flowing dress of green, was reading the births, deaths and marriages page of *The Times*, while Hilary studied the *Daily Mail*. The *Daily News*, taken at Claire's request, and never read by the rest except inadvertently, and sometimes secretly by Mrs. Norris, lay on the floor.

Claire was closeted with her father ; but at noon he, her mother and Hilary were due to depart by motor to Bushey to lunch with the family of the elderly young Conservative, whose conquest Hilary had made at the dinner-party in May. They were to return early in the afternoon so as to get to Mrs. Benjamin's for tea. The performance of *The Pierrot of the Minute* was arranged for half-past five.

Presently the clock in the back drawing-room struck the half-hour.

"That clock's slow," Hilary stated, glancing at her watch. "It's twenty-one minutes to eleven."

"The car is ordered for a quarter to twelve," said Mrs. Norris. "Have you got to go out before that?"

"No, I've only got to beautify myself."

"What are you going to wear?" her sister asked idly.

"My cream-coloured silk jersey-dress. Do you think the green straw hat or the black tulle?"

It was obvious to anyone knowing Hilary well that she had already made up her mind which hat to wear, but she had formed the habit, flattering to Pauline, of consulting her at intervals on questions of toilette. Whether

the younger girl suspected that the question was merely formal, or whether she was preoccupied, she did not at all events seem to be giving it her consideration; she continued to turn over the pages of *Vogue*, and to hum the air of "The Blackbird's Song." Hilary's eyes were fixed on her, and their influence caused her to look up, and say as though hurriedly recalling her wandering attention: "Oh—the black tulle, I should think."

"I'm not sure that transparent hats look right with jersey silk. Aren't they rather too afternoonish—garden partyish? I *think*, on the whole, I shall wear the green pedal straw."

"Oh, do! do!" Pauline answered, with impatience.

"Why, what is the matter with you this morning, darling?" her mother inquired, surprised at her tone. "You must have got out of bed on the wrong side. Or are you worrying about this evening? Is that it, dear? I'm sure you'll do it beautifully, Pauly. You used to act so nicely when you were little."

The girl rose impulsively, and crossing the room to her mother, bent to kiss her. "I'm sorry if I sounded snappy," she said. "I'm sorry, Hilary, I suppose I *am* a little nervous," and she laughed with a certain restraint. Mrs. Norris, holding her youngest daughter's hand, and looking dreamily into her transparent face, filled with a sort of delicate pink and white glow, saw a tiny pucker set between the eyebrows which she had never seen before. "You're feeling quite well, aren't you, darling?" she asked.

"Oh, yes, mother. It's nothing." She drew her hand away and went to the door. "I'm going up," she added, "to practise in the schoolroom. I can't lug that old 'cello right down here."

The remaining occupants of the room sat in silence for a time. Then the younger said: "Pauly needn't be nervous! She'll pull it off splendidly. To begin with, she's word-perfect—and note-perfect; secondly, she'll look so stunning nobody will be able to take their eyes

off her ; and thirdly, she's got a fund of self-confidence to rely on."

Mrs. Norris warmed at this generous tribute, almost as though it were spoken by a stranger. " You've given her a great deal of help," she answered. " I know how you've coached her and practised with her."

" There's something so satisfactory about Pauline," the other pursued, " she responds so quickly to suggestions ; she's so adaptable ; it's like having a hand in creating a work of art." Hilary spoke with calm, sincere enthusiasm, and it would have been clear to a perspicacious listener that here was her real bent—the topic nearest her heart, which moved her most. She was at her least artificial, at her softest and most human at this moment : the thrill of the creator did indeed seem to have informed her ; one felt that she had power, and had used it well.

Mrs. Norris was not conscious of all this ; the thrill of the creative artist, even the æsthetic thrill which he communicates to others through his art, was unknown to her. Hilary's words merely called up a picture of Pauline's prettiness and grace and accomplishment ; the latter was certainly no mean production ; and her mother, lacking even the intense jealous passion of maternity, felt her heart swell with a mild moonlike pride. " She is certainly a very dear girl, a very lovely girl," she said. And then, not liking to leave her other offspring out in the cold, she added : " And Claire is a dear girl, too ; quieter, of course, and not so pretty ; but still, I sometimes think she looks quite distinguished."

Hilary sensibly said nothing : she had nothing to say.

It was significant of the relations now established between Hilary and her adopted mother that it never occurred to the latter to make any soft reference to the eldest of the three daughters herself ; Hilary was treated by her, in fact, much less as a daughter than as a contemporary, with whom Claire and Pauline could be discussed because the tie of custom and blood precluded

disloyalty. It was only Tom Norris's dislike of Hilary, and not the latter's youth, which prevented him treating her in this same way. On the contrary, he behaved towards her very much as he did to Mrs. Agnew, whom he also disliked. He respected them both, but for him they were scarcely women, and had, therefore, no charm ; and so strong was his impression of Hilary's maturity that he had gradually and unconsciously come to omit in her regard one or two of his immemorial paternal habits. He no longer remarked on the number or absence of her letters at breakfast, never reproved her as though she was still a child, while maintaining these customs towards Claire and Pauline. It was the price the two younger girls paid for his strong genuine love and tenderness.

Down in the library he sat at his large table, and Claire at hers. They had gone through the morning post, the girl making notes of some of his answers. He was now perusing his press-cutting albums in which Claire had placed markers at the pages likely to be useful to him in a speech he had to prepare. While he conscientiously read all the passages indicated by her slips, she sat, turned in profile to him, pretending to tidy her desk ; in reality, sunk deep in the slough of despond.

The chill, wintry resignation which had descended on her after her return from Sparrows, had been, at intervals, torn and seared by the blows and flashes of momentary perception, when some word or gesture, some incident or association, made her realise with a brief agonising intensity the magnitude of her loss, and the probable imminence of yet another painful trial. She was perpetually on guard now against self-betrayal, for on several occasions, as on the day of Henrietta's marriage, a sign of her torment had escaped her, and she went in terror of discovery

She had once or twice wondered if in truth it had never occurred to Pauline that Clement having been originally her, Claire's, best friend, the latter had not some prior

claim upon, or at least some prior sentiment concerning him. But she had rejected this idea. Pauline's transparency was not only facial; hers was a candid soul. She was capable of coming to her sister with: "I say, Claire, old thing, aren't you rather keen on Clement?" or some such words; and even had this method seemed to her too crude, she would have employed some ingenuous means to ascertain Claire's precise sentiments, had she entertained any suspicion of their being more than friendly. It was, of course, possible that a step in this direction had stopped short at a consultation with Hilary; Hilary's way with any such unwelcome interruption to her comedy would have been short; but Claire was sure that a questioning word or speculative look would have betrayed Pauline's curiosity. Besides, the girl would never have made that tentative, happy, embarrassed half-confidence of her awakened interest in Clement, if the possibility of Claire's rivalry had ever crossed her mind. Pauline had her opportunity then; her sister's expressions concerning the unmistakable birth of love might very easily have led to questions about Claire's own experiences; but the younger girl had been openly, ingenuously absorbed in her own affair, heedless of her interlocutor's identity as a woman, concerned only with her assurances and advice as a sister and a friend. It was quite clear and certain to Claire that the extreme familiarity of sisterhood reinforced by her own lack of amorous adventures, and her reserve, robbed her, in Pauline's mind, of her real attributes of femininity. The revelation concerning Ivor Webb had taken its place in Pauline's mental picture of Claire's existence and personality as an isolated and unpleasant incident—as indeed it was. No other man had ever been connected, to her knowledge, with Claire, except Lucy and Clement; and here Claire's own character and temperament supported Pauline's unformulated attitude towards her sister's relations with these two; relations so open and straightforward, so unsexual and 'platonic,' that Pauline was not to be blamed for regarding

them exactly as she regarded her own and Claire's relations with girl friends. She had never perceived or expected evidence of flirtation between Claire and either Lucy or Clement; she would have been extremely surprised, perhaps amused, had she perceived it. In fact, she took Claire very much at her own valuation; Claire was a familiar sister, not another marriageable girl.

In this respect, Hilary, of course, was different, in Pauline's eyes. Claire could see the division between them in her junior's mental plan of Society; whereas Claire was the close companion, so near as to be imperfectly visualised, Hilary was the glamour-wreathed insurgent. It was the case of the sparrow and the bird of paradise; the canary recognised, at once, its own affinity to that golden plumage rather than to the drab feathers of its familiar neighbour; but it is not above asking the sparrow's counsel and gratefully accepting a few hints to be collated with the inspiring narratives of the paradise-bird; besides, it genuinely loves the sparrow, and the latter takes what comfort it can from this fact. Claire tasted and found such comfort insipid to her tongue—whose sensibility was blunted, perhaps, by prolonged, forced sipping at less palatable fare. She had passed through moments of nobility when not only was Clement's happiness the supreme object desired beyond her own, but Pauline's, too, a goal worth striving for, with all its attendant pain for herself. But to-day, she could not welcome a deeper draught of bitterness. The strain of the past weeks was beginning to affect her—the continuous effort to appear normally cheerful, the perpetual dissembling of her pain and her emotion at Clement's proximity, her almost shuddering distaste at being left alone with him and Pauline, and her simultaneous unwillingness amounting to inability to leave them alone together. She had begun to wonder how long she could hold out. She spent more and more time with her father, more and more time alone; and, bitterest thought of all, she was not missed; no one noticed her

absence from their company, no one came to seek her out. Perhaps her father had not even noticed that she had worked harder of late.

She rose wearily from her chair, and moved towards the door.

"Stop a minute!" said Tom Norris.

She paused, waiting patiently, without interest, for his next words.

"Come here," he went on.

She crossed to his side, and he took her hand, saying gruffly: "The warm weather isn't doing you any good."

"I'm all right, father," she answered, moved by this unexpected attention.

"You'll be glad to get to Sparrows."

"Oh yes, I shall. Are you coming down with us on Friday?"

"I may be . . . There now; that's all! You can go—I've had enough of you! Off with you!" but he still held her hand and did not let her go till she kissed him.

Even then she lingered with a sudden melting inclination for his comradeship, which seemed to offer a niche of temporary warmth and safety from her isolation. His very ignorance of her plight increased his value as a companion, although she believed that his gesture of affection just now had signalled a dim intuition of her need.

"Father," she said, facing him across his table, "do things get easier as one gets to middle age?" and her thoughts flew backwards to his youthful difficulties, described to her by her mother. She watched him put down his book and raise his eyes to hers over his glasses; he did so slowly; and his eyes were puzzled.

"The cure for difficulties is work," he answered haltingly. "That's—er—my experience. To begin with, half the troubles—the difficulties are—monetary—financial——" he broke off, removing his gaze from her face, as though aware of his own inadequacy of expression. His next words showed a doubt of his adequacy

altogether "Are you worrying about the world? I'm not a philosopher, Claddie; I'm a business man."

"But you must have loved people, and hated them, and wanted things you couldn't have?"

"When I hated anyone, I always remembered that I could work harder and, er—better than him; and so I did; if you—er—beat them, you leave your enemies behind. You might say they won't trouble you any more. I was ambitious; that was what I wanted, Claddie; competition is the best incentive. I shouldn't have met your mother if I hadn't been ambitious."

Claire listened to his answer unconvinced. She thought it remote from her question, and yet it was the genuine utterance of a man who has lived a busy life, if not a full one. Many people would call it full, but then he had left so much out, as perhaps the ambitious man, the business man, the 'successful' man always must. It was a genuine utterance, yet it did not meet her case. Her question was an appeal for a word of hope and consolation to reach her from the harbour of middle-age, an assurance that the tossing ceases and the wind is stilled, the sunlight serene and the shadows unfraught with tormented meanings.

"And you've got all you want, now?" she asked him.

"You think I'm a lucky man to have such daughters? is that it? Well, to tell you a secret, I am quite contented."

Claire gave him a little nod in return for his twinkle, for she could not smile.

She went slowly upstairs, wondering when Clement would arrive from his Medical Board. She entered the back drawing-room, and turning the corner of the folding doors, saw him and Pauline standing in the larger room. He must have mounted in great haste, for his cap, gloves and cane, usually left in the hall, lay on the floor. He held Pauline by her two hands; her head was averted from him towards the window; he seemed that instant to have ceased speaking.

Claire turned and moved in the direction of the bureau.

"Hallo!" said her sister from the other room.

"Hallo, Claire!" the young man echoed.

Looking over her shoulder with an answering word of greeting Claire saw that though they had separated, neither had come towards her. The wide threshold of the larger room framed them, standing apart—Clement in his pale, Pauline in her flushed, silence—as a moment ago it had framed them in their hand-gripped union of lover and beloved. The silence smote on her like the vision of a high curled wave, fast approaching, and she felt a wild helpless gasping rise in her throat. Unaware that she had moved, she found herself faced completely round towards them, as though to breast and to withstand the onslaught of the water. Her fists were clenched at her side, and her teeth clenched so that afterwards they ached. She stepped back, and the bureau supported her.

As though far off, the sunlit room beyond lost its brilliance as a cloud obscured the sun, and then regained it. The hoarse cry of a lavender-seller, the whirring rhythmic tune of a distant hurdy-gurdy, and the subdued warm summer rumble of traffic came up through the windows inextricably mixed with the tired dusty smell of London streets in summer. It all meant something, Claire thought, if only she could comprehend the language; it was all intensely significant, if only she could find the cipher-key. Clement and Pauline were part of this freemasonry of existence—they were in the secret. She was outside, alone, uninitiated, forlorn.

Pauline moved to the door, and went out; but the spell remained unbroken. Nor did Claire lose the sense of her remoteness when she crossed the space between herself and the young man, and, sitting down, asked him for news of his Medical Board. Her voice held one quaver of the vanquished gasping; and the hands laid in her lap were slowly refilling with colour. Not so her interlocutor's face; but he replied in sufficiently commonplace tones

that it was quite certain he would not be sent again to the front.

"Whether I shall get shoved on to light duty remains to be seen," he added, seating himself in his turn. "But I hope to God not—at least——" he broke off, and pulling out his handkerchief, sat forward with his elbows on his knees, gently rubbing it between his palms. He did not look at her.

His loss of equanimity, the disturbed serenity of his face suddenly gave back to Claire her strength, her tenderness, her self-control. The passion of giving, experienced so sharply at the hospital, returned to her, and with it the power of self-forgetfulness. She leaned forward and set her hands on either side of his restless ones.

"You are almost certain to get the War Office job," she said, "and anyway, Clement, wherever you are, you'll be in reach of us. And," she went on, "the war may be over this autumn, and you'll be able to turn into a stodgy old farmer again."

He still did not look at her, but answered: "I shall never be *such* a stodgy old farmer again."

"Well, the army is bound to have some effect on you," said Claire, but each knew that it was not the army only which had changed him. She took away her hands, but remained seated close to him.

"I hope I shall be able to come down on Saturday for several days," Clement presently announced; and as he uttered the words, Claire discovered in her heart a full-grown decision not to subject herself to the trial they implied.

"Oh. I'm going to stay with Aunt Connie on Monday," she said lightly.

"Claire!" the young man answered, looking at her at last. "Please don't go away the moment I get there. Do stay. I was looking forward to us all being there together."

She shook her head. "I shall be there for the weekend."

"Ah, but stay over—anyway, for part of the week. I expect I shall have to come up at the end of it to see Osler or some one."

"Aunt Connie asked——" she began, with a sensation of defending her very life, but he interrupted impulsively:

"Aunt Connie isn't nearly as fond of you as I am! She can have you to stay any old time. Please, Claire, do as I ask!"

She sat silent, envisaging the prospect before her, inwardly shrinking from it, appalled at the possibilities of pain which it held. He was asking an impossibility of her—that she should witness every stage of his courtship, drink every drop of gall, and this in the setting of her one moment of spurned triumph, where she had seen him stand within her grasp and had not reached out a hand.

"Why are you being so obstinate?" he asked her, rising and smiling down on her, with a look already almost completely normal. "It's unlike you, Claire, to be unreasonable. Tell me one good reason for having to go to Mrs. Agnew's, and I may be convinced. Without that, I shall take it that you've got some scunner on me."

She turned her face to the window, and it was bleak. "Silly!" she murmured.

"Tell me," he went on, still smiling, "what have I done to sacrifice your friendship? . . . You admit I'm blameless? It's just some rotten fad of yours to choose this very moment to go to a place you only go to once in a blue moon. It will be splendid at Sparrows, if only this weather lasts. And Pauline and I have planned an expedition by car which it's no use trying to explain to you without a map . . . Is that agreed, then, that you don't go till the end of next week—isn't it, Claire?"

"Very well," she answered, striking her flag.

They sat together in a row with Mr. and Mrs. Norris and Hilary to watch the performance of *The Pierrot of the Minute* in the mellow afternoon.

The low stage was erected against a shrubbery to which Lombardy poplars gave height, birches and white-starred syringa grace and lightness, laurels and laurestines, holly and rhododendrons, darkness and density. The entrances were made from the back. The Amateur Orchestra, seated at one side, performed a short overture composed by Leonard Benjamin ; and this was followed by Fauré's " Claire de Lune," sung " off " by Pauline. Then, after a moment's silence Pierrot entered, bearing a sheaf of lilies, and, after standing in a pose of listening, broke softly into a song of Dowson's incorporated by the young man in the play to which it did not really belong :

" In the deep violet air
Not a leaf is stirred ;
There is no sound heard
But afar the rare
Trilled voice of a bird."

Then followed the opening speech.

Claire sat in a dream of unreality among the rustling of silks and the whispers of the audience. Her eyes were fixed on Leonard who, dressed after the foppish fashion of a sophisticated Watteau-Mummer, in white, but with an unwhitened face, made a picturesque slim small figure on the dark green background, in the diffused golden light of the summer afternoon. His voice floated out clear and precise, filled with the delicate mock sentiment of the eighteenth century. Music began again to sound while he spoke, very softly and dreamily, and again ceased. Suddenly one of his lines brought Claire out of her abstraction :

" Why came I here, and why am I Pierrot ? "

and then again :

" Why am I here, and why am I Pierrot ? "

The tone and gesture with which these words were spoken made them more philosophical than rhetorical, so that

Pierrot typified the eternally-renewed question of man confronted with the mystery of life and consciousness. She had a sharp sense of man's splendidly proud and absurdly futile measuring of himself against the universe, his utter insignificance in the face of that vastness, his high undaunted courage. Pierrot stood, a white question mark against the green leaves; and the syringa stars hanging on the boughs behind him brought to mind the invisible stars of the firmament.

How could it matter at once so *much* and so *little* whether one human were tormented or content? Could she deny herself because her eyes perceived space which her brain could not measure? Was it not possible that her heart contained not only its definite tragedy, but also the earth, the heavens and infinity? Which was the truth—that she mattered supremely, or not at all?

When her attention returned to the play, her sister was entering to the sound of plucked violin-strings, and bending over Pierrot, who lay asleep. She looked and was indeed a quaint, lovely, mingling of mortal and fairy, of costly and diaphanous, of cold and tender. Pierrot awoke and was dazzled. They played at school, they played at courtiers, they played at love, they sang and disputed and stepped a measure. Then, as day's coming was signalled, the Moon-maiden charmed her lover asleep once more, and withdrew, glidingly, singing a lyric which was taken up as she disappeared by two other voices, so that the performance ended as a harmony, growing fainter, fainter, dying away.

At once a screen was placed across the front of the stage, and at the same time, clapping broke out. Hilary leaned forward across her mother and addressed Claire and Clement. "Wasn't it jolly? Didn't Pauline look charming?"

People now began to rise and move about. The Norrises followed their example and stood in a group watching the crowd of visitors strolling hither and thither on the sunlit lawn. Besides the lawn and the shrubbery,

there were but two narrow paths and, before the house, red-brick walks between rose-beds, the whole garden being encircled by a high red wall. It was, for London, a singularly green and gracious and flowery spot, whose simplicity was in strange contrast to the loaded and decorated richness of Mrs. Benjamin's interior. Mrs. Benjamin herself moved with something of her daughter's awkward grace among the guests, while Vera stood in an isolated group of her own friends discussing the performance just concluded.

Mrs. Norris, Clement and Claire were all silent, while Hilary chattered on undisturbed for a moment. "I arranged with Pauline to help her change her dress," she said, "only I don't know my way about the house. Can you see Miss Benjamin, Claire? Ah, there she is—I'll go and ask her." She went in the direction of the clustered musicians; and the deserted trio turned in mute agreement and walked slowly towards the house.

"Pauly was very good," Mrs. Norris mildly remarked.

"Awfully!" the young man assented.

"There's Mrs. Stokes—I must go and speak to her" and the lady left them in her turn. The friends continued to pace between the groups and couples laughing and talking on all sides, until they came to the rose parterre, terraced one step above the lawn, and intersected with bricked paths. Two unoccupied chairs were half hidden behind some lilac bushes, and here they sat down.

"She was beautiful," said Clement.

"Yes," agreed Claire.

"And her voice! I'd never heard it properly in the open air before. It was lovely—it made me think of Theocritus."

"Yes. It *was* lovely. Free and wild, and yet——" she broke off, and her companion supplied:

"And yet soft and kind, too."

"Yes." Claire said again.

They were silent for a long time. The light began to grow level, more golden, less diffused; in the shadows

the lawn was like velvet, and like emerald in the sun ; the wall, where the sunlight struck it, was a rich soft red. Looking down the garden, they saw that the tide of guests was setting slowly towards them, that some were already closing their bright-coloured parasols, and one or two fussy old ladies wreathing themselves with scarves. Mrs. Benjamin took her place close to the house door, and there some friends, departing early, took leave of her. Vera, gossiping nonchalantly, her dark face clouded with boredom, passed unheeding close by her seated friends, and as she was between them and her mother, hiding the door from them, she stopped suddenly and exclaimed to her companion, " There's Pauline at last." Then she moved quickly on.

Pauline Norris, dressed in palest periwinkle blue, with a wide blue hat, stepped down from the terrace to the green. At once she was surrounded.

" It's no earthly use trying to get near her now," said Clement.

Claire, her eyes fixed, like his, on her sister, half seen athwart the group, shook her head. " They'll all be going soon," she answered.

After a pause he said impulsively, " Shall I tell you what I did between lunch and coming here—while Pauline was resting ? I bought a car off a man I know at Park Square."

" Clement ! How amusing. What kind ? "

" A Calthorpe two-seater, with a dicky. He's managed somehow to collect a store of petrol—I didn't ask him how ! And now he's so ill he won't be able to stir out for months, poor chap, so I persuaded him to let me have it."

Still half in a dream, Claire urged him on to talk of his plans ; she had often wondered how Pauline fitted into his idea of existence after the war. " You'll go back to farming ? " she said.

" Oh, yes ! I'd rather do that than anything. But I'd like to have a small place in London, too. I can

afford that now." Suddenly, he rose to his feet. "Come on, Claire, your mother looks like going."

Claire put her hands on the arms of her chair; but her weight seemed leaden. She had a horrible sensation of weakness and impotence. "Clement," she exclaimed, almost under her breath, "Clement, give me your hand, pull me up."

He did not hear, for he had moved two paces away, and was standing in absorbed contemplation of Pauline, who, flanked by Hilary and Vera, and followed by Mrs. Norris with Leonard and Freddie Stokes, was approaching her hostess. Nor did he hear when, with no idea of attracting his attention, but as though compelled to rehearse a part, Claire repeated in a low stricken voice: "Clement, give me your hand."

CHAPTER XXI

THE FRUIT WILL FALL

CLAIRE shut the door of her room quickly and leaned on it, panting, as though she shut out an enemy. Going up to find Pauline, she had heard through the half-open door of the schoolroom one urgent sentence which had caused her to turn and fly to her refuge.

"Pauline! Listen! I couldn't bear to be without you!" The words might have constituted simply an appeal, but, spoken in that tone, they furnished an answer to a question which had been exercising her. She had advised Clement to be bold, and this latest incident, combined with the former occasion when Claire had come on him and Pauline in the drawing-room, proved that he had taken her advice. That silence, following an urgent speech not overheard but felt as still hanging in the air, and this sentence of command, made Clement's line of action clear.

It was the day following that of the performance, and to-morrow the whole family was to decamp to Sparrows. As Claire leaned her back against the door her trunk confronted her, gaping for her possessions; the books which she had selected for the maid to pack stood on a table near.

"Pauline! Listen! I couldn't bear to be without you!" Couldn't bear! How easily, she reflected with bitterness, those words are uttered; and how many intolerable ills are borne, have to be borne, because there is no escape from them. With what absolute conviction she herself could cry: "Clement, listen, I can't bear

to be without you " ; and yet she would have to bear it : she had no choice.

She went slowly to a chair and sat down facing the window. The weather was cool and clouded, yesterday's glory only a memory. Beyond her room she felt rather than heard the rumour of the house, the rumour of London, the rumour of the world ; without was activity ; within, stagnation. She had the sensation of being a pool of water unrefreshed, unstirred, slowly evaporating.

There would be no relief from her own companionship until this evening, when she was going to dine with Lucy Lincoln at his flat. She had done so several times since Henrietta's marriage, and she looked back and forward to the occasions with pleasure. She had then found it possible by an effort to banish the thought of Clement, to forget her troubles, to sit in Lucy's bare, pale room—so intimately connected with his sister, her greatest friend—enjoying his companionship, eating supper with his beautiful worn Georgian spoons and forks. There was always, after the two simple courses, coloured fruit in an old, smooth, creamy Wedgwood dish, and delicious steaming coffee and, for her, Henrietta's cigarettes. His few beloved cared-for possessions, the slow tranquil movements of his long limbs, his silence, his rare words and smiles, his rarer deep guffaw, combined to form an atmosphere at once grave and easy, homely and fastidious, sensuous and monastic. Claire, sitting in a big upholstered chair, blowing smoke luxuriously through her nostrils or turning the leaves of a book, had a sense of being shut off from the world. Not that Lucy was precious or inhuman, he did not despise existence, he only found it wearisome. Sometimes he and his guest would chant alternate stanzas of a litany in celebration of life's pain and tedium. At others they would distil into a few words the peace and joy which they experienced in the country, their delight in the seasons and the flowers. Once they had gone together

to a revue, and had returned on foot through the dark streets from Soho to Westminster, chuckling over the quips of the low comedian.

Claire never spoke to Lucy of her personal troubles, and she knew that Henrietta had not done so, yet she thought that he divined at least a part of it. There was a kindness in his impersonality which touched her ; even the choice of dessert and the care with which he poured the exact amount of milk into her coffee seemed tributes of sympathy and friendship. There was, too, she imagined, a shadow of kindness in his inscrutable eyes, and his gesture of greeting and good-bye reminded her that he was her friend.

But between now and this evening lay a wilderness to be traversed ; not a vacant desert of tranquillity, but a tract of lurking dangers. Prospecting it, she felt fear rising in her, and to dispel this exaggerated mood she rose and began to wrap her shoes in their tussore silk shrouds, laying them on the bed. As she did so she counted up the things she had to do before the evening : to draft one letter for her father's approval, to type out another, to exercise the dogs, and to sort the music in the drawing-room and schoolroom with a view to taking some to Sparrows. This brought her back to her recent quest ; she had, when checked, been seeking Pauline to give her a telephone message ; an answer was required immediately, and she must nerve herself to deliver the message whatever obstacles might present themselves. She rose and, going to the door, paused to collect herself. Then, opening it, she called, " Pauline ! I say, Pauline, where are you ? "

After a brief pause her sister's voice replied coolly, " Here," and she appeared in the passage.

Claire retreated into her room. " The Stokes particularly want you to dine with them to-night, and go to a theatre. Gertrude says Captain Arbuthnott lost his heart to you yesterday."

" Oh, really ? " said Pauline, coming into the room.

"That's awfully good of him, but as a matter of fact I have no intention of going out to-night."

"Well, will you ring them up at once? They wanted to know immediately." Claire turned to her trunk as she spoke.

Her sister went to the table and began to pick up the books one by one, glancing at their titles. "Yes, I'll ring her up in a minute. I must say Captain Arbuthnott's admiration leaves me cold." Her tone suggested that she was inclined to conversation, but Claire merely replied by asking her to hand over some of the shoes from the bed. Pauline did so, and then returned to the books. "Rupert Brooke?—I've never read him." She began to read a poem here and there. "What does 'Libido' mean?"

"Desire, lust," Claire answered.

"Oh." She read the sonnet through to herself, and then, apparently, a second time; at all events she kept her eyes on the page, saying thoughtfully after a pause, "'Love wakens love.'" Finally she put the book down.

"Sometimes," her sister replied, looking up and surprised at her own impulsiveness. She stayed on her knees, resting her hand on the brink of the trunk, and studied Pauline.

The latter's appearance was, and had been, exactly as usual; there was no hint in it of anything untoward having occurred, as there had been after her interview with Ivor Webb in the schoolroom. Then she had been flushed and a little dishevelled; now her composure was complete, although the extreme coolness of her voice when she answered Claire's summons signified perhaps a successful effort to re-establish a normal exterior and self-control. But now, as her sister's eyes rested on her face, a slow, faint flush stained it, and her clear eyes clouded. At the sight, Claire rose and stood before her.

"Claire!" she exclaimed softly; and her voice betrayed all the emotions she had masked so well, "tell me—are feelings—wrong?"

The other kept her distance, and her reserve added weight to her words. "No," she answered, "as long as they aren't just passing sensations with nothing else behind. And even then they aren't wrong, only it's wrong to act on them." The words seemed to be put into her mouth; they were calmly, though gently, spoken. All her tenderness was in her look, which Pauline, whose flush had faded, returned.

"But they couldn't—could they?—exist alone?" she asked.

"Perhaps not with you," Claire replied. "People are different. If they can't with you, I'm glad; then it's all right."

"They couldn't be wrong!" Pauline exclaimed with a sort of innocent rapture. "They are too lovely, Claire. I didn't know, I'd no idea, or I would never have let—Ivor—touch me." She paused, and looked past her sister while her thoughts gathered. "I owe you a lot," she said at last, looking at her again. "And I told Clement that I'd given way to Hilary about Margesson, and he says it doesn't matter. So you must forgive me too, Claire." She held out her hand.

Claire took it, in the formal hand-clasp, as though sealing a compact. "There's nothing to forgive, then," she said. "It would only have been hard to forgive if it had harmed Clement. But I know you'd never do anything to hurt him."

"No," Pauline agreed gravely, "I never would."

"Now go and telephone," said Claire.

When the door closed she stood a long time motionless, letting the significance of the scene drop far down into her consciousness. It brought with it a certainty in place of the doubt it displaced; she knew now that Pauline's surrender to Clement's bold attack was imminent. The girl had revealed in their recent colloquy the soft emotion which filled her, the revelation of love, the wavering doubt—a doubt probably finally routed by Claire's words. Pauline was ripe for conquest, the tumult

of her heart was a happy tumult, her candour was unclouded, her impulse warm, spontaneous, innocent. She was about to raise to her lips a cup whose draught was stainless, though strong; she would complete the gesture at Sparrows, and Claire would testify to its fitness and its grace.

Claire stood overawed by the startling clearness of this picture and by the inevitability of her own doom. It was as though she were on a smooth inclined plane down which she slipped and slid, had been slipping and sliding for many months; there was no cranny for her feet, no roughness for her grasping hands; only the slightness of the incline prolonged her descent. She saw now how the path was made of pieces of wood fitted together with great skill and precision, closer than the finest parquet, and polished to a glistening surface. She herself had had a hand in its construction, and though she had apparently done so of her own free will, she perceived now that it had been forced labour. She could no more have escaped the dictates of destiny, with its bag of tricks—inherited tendencies, environment, education, and that still more incalculable master-trick, personality—than she could escape death. And there was in this realisation not only horror, but a high consolation; there was at least something unique, complete, in being Claire Norris, something which summoned her pride and forbade her to despair. In common with the whole race of man, she confronted life and its conflicts, the universe and its inexplicability, death and its finality; and, in common with the whole race of man, she admitted and marvelled at their majesty, their mystery, their possession of the ultimate word. She possessed nothing but her consciousness, her individuality; her word—half question, half cry of defiance—was finite, but it was not a word of defeat.

She moved at last, stiffly, as though waking from a trance. Looking at her watch, she saw that she just had time to take the dogs out before tea. Opening the

door, she perceived Clement emerging from the school-room.

"Halloa," he said, "where's Pauline got to?"

"She had to go and telephone to the Stokeses."

"Where are you off to?" he asked, seeing that she wore a hat.

"Matthew and Thomas are waiting to be aired," she answered. She had not moved from the threshold of her room, and as she spoke a memory came to her of a nocturnal talk with Henrietta when the latter had exclaimed that if Clement could enter Claire's room he would know her better. She smiled to herself with an irony which somehow enhanced instead of marring her exalted mood, and, with a sort of bravado, as though snapping her fingers in the face of fate, she stood aside, saying: "I don't believe you've ever been into my room, Clement."

In response to her gesture of invitation he went past her into the room. "It's very nice," he said. "Hallo, here's Mrs. Norris—and Pauline! And Henrietta."

While he examined the photographs she went to the window. It was quite easy, after all, as long as she need not look at him or say much.

"What an extraordinary number of nice people there are," Clement exclaimed unexpectedly, "or am I particularly lucky? I used to think I had fewer belongings than most—not that I minded till father died. And then I suddenly acquired a family—people I never want to be very far away from. Do you know, Claire, I'm filled with an unreasoning fear that you're going to marry and go to Australia or some God-forsaken spot!" He laughed, but Claire did not turn, and he went on: "I'm developing a taste for family life; a patriarchal sort of existence. I suppose that's why I was fed up at the idea of your leaving Sparrows so soon."

She moved and looked at him. She could see that he was at once grave and happy, his mood the antithesis of hers, which was miserable and exalted.

"Don't go to Australia!" he begged her, smiling.

"No," she answered, "I won't."

He glanced round the room and said: "I see you've indulged your passion for grey."

She nodded, and went towards the door. The room had contracted: they were too close. At Sparrows there would be space and solitude; she would not so dog and so be dogged by the ambushed situation. Here in London she, Clement and Pauline were crowded into too small a cage; there it would be easier to gain a sense of proportion, a perspective, a readjustment of her mind to new conditions. Here they perpetually peeped out at her from corners, pulling faces and scaring her; there she would be able to envisage, assimilate, accept them. It would not be easy there, but here it was impossible. The sordidness of having unintentionally overheard words and overlooked incidents not meant for her tarnished and coarsened the task of which her conception was so bright and fine; she felt acutely the odious position of onlooker which Hilary upheld with such complacency.

At Sparrows, too, she would be able to have a long visit from Henrietta, whose return to town was fixed for Saturday; and a week-end visit from Lucy. And there were all the sweets of summer stored for her. So she counted over her possessions, strengthening herself for the supreme ordeal.

She found only her mother and Hilary at tea. "Pauline discovered that Clement had never been to Rumplemayers," her sister informed her, "so she hailed him forth. . . . Of course, it's not the same thing at all as the Paris Rumplemayer, although even it's not *my* favourite haunt for *le five o'clock*; I prefer Gagé, near the Etoile, or Colombin, or even Chiboust. There are too many Americans at Rumplemayers—they succeed in destroying the Parisian atmosphere, which is, after all, what one goes to Paris for! Poor Paris!" She sighed

with undisturbed equanimity, and helped herself to a large slice of cake.

"I wonder if Clement is taking his car down to Sparrows," Claire asked her mother, more for the sake of saying something than because she grudged Hilary her monopoly of conversation. It was the latter who answered her :

"He's going to run Pauline down in it. Though where he gets the petrol it were better not to inquire."

"He said the man he bought it from had some," said Mrs. Norris, and Claire added with some irritation :

"And anyway, it's his own business."

"Oh, you needn't defend Clement to me, my dear Claire. I know that he's as honest as the day."

After a suitable pause Claire began to sort the music ; this took her some time. Hilary continued to talk, their mother occasionally making mild replies. Claire lent only an inattentive ear ; but she became aware at one point that her sister was discoursing on the iniquity of keeping dogs in town. She expressed the opinion that Thomas and Matthew, for instance, would be far happier if they were kept permanently at Sparrows.

"We shouldn't see much of them," Mrs. Norris pointed out. "I like the dear little dogs to be about." She persisted in referring to them as if they were puppies, although they were both large now. "And," she went on, "Claire and Pauline take them out a lot."

"It's rather a matter of principle," Hilary retorted calmly. "Of course, every one likes having his or her dog in town ; but nevertheless, as a general principle, I think it is a great mistake."

"And I suppose," said Claire, "that in the country you'd make it a matter of principle not to have them in the house ? What's the good of a dog who's simply a dog ? We have dogs as friends and companions, not as objects to wreak our principles on." She spoke with perfect good humour, all irritation was absent from her voice ; she looked calmly at her sister, offering her her own coin.

"Your metaphors are rather mixed," said Hilary. "And when you say 'our,' are you speaking for Pauline as well as for yourself?"

"Yes," Claire answered. "I don't imagine that I love Matthew more than Pauline loves Thomas."

"Of course I'm fond of animals too, but I think your way of speaking is rather ridiculously exaggerated."

"You don't care a rap for animals, and your way of speaking proves it." Claire's amiability was not one whit disturbed; only her heart filled with the exhilaration of battle.

"My dear Claire, you're merely being childish."

"My dear Hilary, you're merely hedging."

They confronted each other in silence, the elder girl sitting, the younger standing, a pile of music on her arm. Their eyes met, and neither would give way, until Claire, conscious of victory, smiled and added: "However, there's no point in discussing it, as neither of the dogs is yours, and they'll come back here with us to town in the autumn." Then she turned and left the room.

What Mrs. Norris thought of this encounter nobody inquired, though Claire subsequently wondered.

Claire found the maid packing her trunk and stayed for a quarter of an hour to help her. Then she went into the schoolroom and began to sort the music there. It was in great disorder; half *Samson and Delilah* was missing, and two ragtimes were lovingly enclosed in Woolf's religious songs. With a sense of usefulness, she found the stray portions and classified the songs and pieces in various different piles.

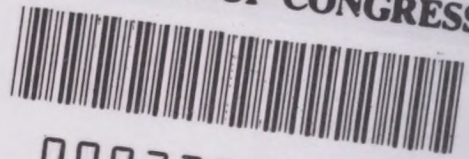
Outside it had come on to rain; transparent veils of rain fell down between the houses; the dry paved court of the club and the dusty leaves of the plane trees quickly became dark with moisture. Claire stood at the window; it was almost her favourite pastime; she found endless entertainment in the minutest occurrences which she witnessed—a hand or part of a face at a window opposite, a cat furtively passing below, a pigeon and two or three

sparrows, a whistling errand boy, a silent, luxurious motor, children with nurses and a perambulator, persons apparently of the dullest sort, started in her trains of grave, sensational, romantic or amused conjecture. She was a spectator highly sensitive to suggestion ; she needed only the slightest stimulus. The present scene contained no foot passengers, and if dramas enacted themselves in the club opposite they did so behind curtains. Moreover, the grey wet made the afternoon dreary. Nevertheless Claire remained a long time staring out. Perhaps the sober view suited her mood, which had fallen from the height of courage to the everyday level of restraint and patience and pain. Only she could not forget the height ; the draught of that air had strengthened, and perhaps still sustained her. She remembered that she had risen above conflict and resentment and the tyranny of thwarted aims ; and though simply to be herself seemed now a forlorn, small destiny, stripped of beauty and promise, she remembered that it had seemed then a splendid responsibility. And it would come again, though she had lost it now—that sense of relation with the universe, that emotion towards life. It could never, at least while youth lasted, desert her finally ; it would come to her again at Sparrows, where she was going to bear the final strain of battle, to suffer the final defeat, to witness the victory which she had not contested. She would look up and see the sky through the leaves and unswollen fruits of the orchard trees as in the spring she had seen it through the blossom of cherry, apple and plum ; and, recognising once more the inevitability of her pain, she would testify once more that for the living soul surrender to despair is impossible.

THE END

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